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JULIA GUERNSEY

RITUAL AND POWER IN STONE

The Linda Schele Series in Maya and Pre-Columbian Studies

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RITUAL & POWER IN STONE

*The Performance of Rulership
in Mesoamerican Izapan Style Art*



JULIA GUERNSEY




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For Abby and Jack

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project began in the spring of 1994, when I tentatively approached my doctoral adviser at the University of Texas at Austin, the late Professor Linda Schele, about the possibility of working on the site of Izapa, in modern Chiapas, Mexico, for my dissertation topic. She looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, shrugged her shoulders, and said “No.” “But,” she added—probably in response to the look of stunned disappointment on my face—“you can work on the Izapan style.” “Oh!” I exclaimed, enormously relieved and blissfully ignorant of the implications of this mandate.

And so began a journey through the complexities of the Late Preclassic period (300 BC–AD 250) in ancient Mesoamerica, and a visually powerful corpus of objects that was created at that time. While the dissertation explored a series of thematic continuities in Late Preclassic Izapan style monuments, this study moves beyond a primarily iconographic focus and considers the monuments not only within their immediate architectural setting but also within the greater political and economic matrix of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica. This book privileges the monuments and an art historical viewpoint in a way that departs from previous scholarship on Late Preclassic Mesoamerica, which traditionally has emphasized archaeological data, typologies, chronologies, and culturally circumscribed regions. Rather than viewing the monuments merely as a reflection of the dramatic changes taking place during this period—such as the forging of a codified language of divine kingship or a widespread Mesoamerican exchange in hieroglyphic writing

and literacy, for instance—the approach used here considers the monuments as one of many forces directly responsible for motivating and structuring such significant developments.

That said, this is still a tentative inquiry, which will need to be modified in the future to accommodate new monuments, new hieroglyphic decipherments, and new archaeological discoveries. The nature of Precolumbian research is dynamic, ever evolving at a pace that seems to increase with each passing year. Art history’s role within this process, especially with regards to southeastern Mesoamerica and the region that witnessed the rise of Maya civilization, also is developing, only having begun in earnest with Herbert J. Spinden’s 1913 *A Study of Maya Art, Its Subject Matter and Historical Development*. While fitting the sculpture and built environment of the Late Preclassic period into an art historical framework is an ongoing task, this study is a step in that direction. Likewise, although it explores just one subset of monuments from this period, and focuses on only one of many regions in Mesoamerica that witnessed enormous transition at this time, it does so from a variety of vantage points that more fully articulate the sophisticated role of sculpture in literally giving voice to networks of elite communication and exchange at a specific juncture in Mesoamerican history.

Chapter 1 provides a general introduction to the Late Preclassic period in southeastern Mesoamerica by considering some of the major cultural and economic developments that characterized this segment of history. While it emphasizes the patterns of continuity that archaeological

and art historical data reveal during this time period, it also addresses lingering, more enigmatic questions, such as the contrasting ways in which elites at neighboring sites chose to express authority, some through monumental sculpture and others through purely architectonic means. It also contains a brief summary of the spread of hieroglyphic literacy during the Late Preclassic period. The Late Preclassic was the first epoch in which certain ancient Mesoamerican groups chose to express their histories in the form of writing, and the sharing of script traditions and associated iconography throughout southeastern Mesoamerica reveals critical insights into well-established communication spheres of this time.

Chapter 2 places the site of Izapa within this Late Preclassic milieu and focuses more exclusively on the Pacific piedmont region. It summarizes the archaeological history of Izapa throughout the Preclassic period while also considering the site's location at the nexus of two distinct cultural regions, those of the Maya to the east and the Mixe-Zoque to the west. This setting undoubtedly fostered the development of the Izapan style, which appears to have transcended linguistic and ethnic boundaries and become a *lingua franca* of its time. It also considers the origin and function of the stela form, which was central to the public dissemination of symbolic and formal information during the Late Preclassic period. The Izapan style reached its fullest maturation within the medium of carved stone stelae, which were employed by elites at numerous sites to organize and define the parameters of their sacred site centers.

In a somewhat different vein, Chapter 3 explores the history of the research surrounding Izapa and the Izapan style. It begins with the first mention of Izapa and its monuments by scholars in the 1930s and continues through the present. Importantly, a historiographical approach such as this frames discussions of Izapa and the Izapan style against the broader history of Mesoamerican scholarship and provides insight into general assumptions, some more accurate than others, that have been assigned to this unique stylistic and iconographic phenomenon. The chapter also

addresses thorny questions of style versus iconography, which provide the basis for any art historical discussion of monuments and imagery. It also reveals the importance of an art historical methodology for revealing paths of communication that can be overshadowed by conflicting archaeological, linguistic, and ethnohistoric data.

Chapter 4 directs attention to the motif of bird-costumed figures within the corpus of Izapan style monuments, a theme that becomes the focus of the remainder of the book. It attempts to place this imagery within the pictorial and conceptual trajectory of Preclassic and Classic period Mesoamerican art. Particular attention is paid throughout to notions of supernatural contact, their manifestation in the artistic record, and their deeply complex relationship to expressions of formalized authority in ancient Mesoamerica. This chapter asks as many questions as it answers, problematizing issues of supernatural communication in relationship to the Late Preclassic Izapan style and inviting further exploration into the conceptual foundations of rulership during this period.

Having outlined a broad historical framework in the first four chapters, I focus in Chapter 5 exclusively on the rich repertoire of imagery, from Izapa and elsewhere during the Late Preclassic period, of avian costumed figures. In particular, it considers a range of mythological, hieroglyphic, archaeological, and ethnohistoric data that provide a compelling context within which this imagery can be understood. It also moves beyond purely formal or iconographic discussions and attempts to frame this imagery—which depicts the vivid performances of rulers in the costume and persona of a well-known bird deity—against well-established Mesoamerican traditions of supernatural communication and divinely sanctioned authority.

Chapter 6 considers the context of these monuments and their function in physically structuring the ritual centers of Late Preclassic sites. The discussion deliberately underscores the role of the carved monuments, particularly stelae, as protagonists within a dynamic environment of sculpture, architecture, and human actors. Emphasis is on the site of Izapa and the ways rulers defined and

manipulated their performative environment through the vehicle of sculpture during the Late Preclassic period. Yet the chapter also broaches broader discussions of the nature of sacred space and how it served to articulate societal order. It further considers the influence of mythological traditions in constructing the built environment and the vehicles, in particular astronomy, through which these myths were shared with striking consistency across time and space.

Lastly, Chapter 7 explores the economic implications of this recurring motif of rulers, costumed as birds, which was featured at a number of Late Preclassic sites. This chapter, more than the others, is an exploratory step toward understanding the potential economic ramifications of these avian rituals that figured so prominently into monumental sculptural programs of the time. It links patterns of avian performance, detectable in the art historical record, to matrices of political, economic, and supernatural exchange. While postulating a relationship between ritual behavior and trade is not new, the suggestion that avian performance and its expression in the sculptural record of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica was one aspect of a sophisticated system of elite exchange is novel.

As stated at the beginning of this preface, the initial stages of this project began as dissertation research under the guidance of the late Linda Schele, in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at Austin. The fact that the project has evolved considerably over the ensuing years by no means denies the critical role she played in its early development. Linda always sought out the “big picture,” and so, too, this book attempts to place Izapa and the Izapan style on the grander stage of Mesoamerican history. I am equally grateful for the chance encounter many years ago with an art history course taught by Andrea Stone at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Andrea’s pivotal role in introducing me to the realm of Precolumbian art, and the many ways in which we can approach it, is inestimable. I also owe enormous debts of gratitude to David Freidel and Kent Reilly, both of whom watched this project develop from its

inception and offered unending encouragement and sage advice throughout.

A number of friends and colleagues read and commented on early chapters and drafts of this book. In particular, Michael Love, Heather Orr, Elizabeth Pope, and Kathryn Reese-Taylor went beyond the call of friendship and graciously read the book manuscript in its entirety; their discerning eyes and detailed comments contributed immeasurably to the final form of this book. Kathryn Reese-Taylor and Elizabeth Reese Baloutine accompanied me on a research trip to Izapa and its environs, and I thank them for the shared insights, shared photographs, and the good company. Michael Love generously contributed his extensive knowledge of the Pacific Coast during the Preclassic period throughout the completion of this project and provided guided tours from coastal La Blanca into the piedmont of the Pacific slope. Isabel Love provided entertainment and laughter.

In addition, Flora Clancy contributed insight and valuable resources. For epigraphic and linguistic advice, I turned to the expertise of David Mora-Marín and Kathryn Josserand. I also thank Allen Christenson, John Pohl, and Eugenia Robinson for their thoughtful comments on particular portions of the manuscript. Matthew Looper provided enormously helpful comments for the final draft, for which I thank him as well.

Numerous colleagues also shared their thoughts on the Late Preclassic period in general. Many of them were participants in informal sessions dedicated to the Late Preclassic period that I organized each year in conjunction with the annual Maya Meetings at the University of Texas at Austin, and I thank them for their willingness to openly share ideas and engage in lively debate about many issues. They include Fred Bove, Kat Brown, Palma Buttles Valdez, John Clark, Virginia Fields, Jim Garber, Hal Green, Richard Hansen, John Justeson, Terrence Kaufman, Peter Keeler, Jennifer Mathews, Mike McBride, Dorie Reents-Budet, Dominique Rissolo, Travis Stanton, Juan Antonio Valdés, and Fred Valdez. In addition, conversations on a variety of art historical, archaeological, and epigraphic issues with

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allowed me to focus uninterruptedly (if such a thing is possible with two small children) on creating an initial draft of this manuscript in 2002. A John D. Murchison Fellowship in Art in the Department of Art and Art History in 2004 facilitated completion of the project, and I am also grateful for a University Cooperative Society Subvention Grant awarded by the University of Texas at Austin. I owe a special debt of gratitude to several important benefactors of the Department of Art and Art History and the Mesoamerican Center at the University of Texas at Austin, in particular Bettye and Bill Nowlin and Sherry Smith. A very warm thank you also goes to Jane and Michael Scott and Anne Ashmun for an unforgettable trip to Mexico that was filled with adventure and done with style. Welcome assistance in the form of faculty travel grants was also provided by the Office of the Vice President and Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Within the Department of Art and Art History itself, I extend my sincerest thanks to Department Chair Kenneth Hale and all who facilitated departmental travel, awards, and research conducted in conjunction with this project. I also thank my colleagues in the department, who provided a stimulating environment in which to ponder and pursue questions such as those addressed in this book.

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I also extend my warmest thanks to G. Daniel López, who first came to my attention as an advanced undergraduate student deeply interested in all things Precolumbian. His technological expertise quickly became evident, and the vast majority of illustrations in this book are the result of his superb efforts at creating maps, scanning, designing, and compiling images.

Closer to home, I thank my family. My mother, Rita Ford Guernsey, an accomplished artist, pro-

vided several of the illustrations in this volume; her talent speaks for itself. She and my father, Anthony Guernsey, have enthusiastically encouraged my pursuits at every level forever; they have also provided a model of excellence in all aspects of my life. Sarah Guernsey, Michael Guernsey, and Richard Holland provided good humor and moral support throughout the course of this project. John Kappelman's generous assistance, techni-

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RITUAL AND POWER IN STONE

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LATE PRECLASSIC PERIOD

Nevertheless, as we cut farther down, the elaborateness and Classic appearance of the discovered structures were no less apparent. Things were not getting simpler, or cruder, or increasingly formative.

—Coe and McGinn 1963

INTRODUCTION

The Late Preclassic period in Mesoamerica, which dates from 300 BC to approximately AD 250, witnessed the florescence of a unique mode of artistic expression known as the Izapan style. The term “Izapan style” takes its name from the site of Izapa in the hills above the Pacific coastal plain, or Soconusco region, of modern Chiapas, Mexico (fig. 1.1). The convention of erecting carved stone altars and stelae in pairs in courtyards surrounded by platform mounds first emerged during the Late Preclassic period in this region (fig. 1.2).¹ The monuments at Izapa are perhaps best known for their dense, figural compositions carved in low-relief that bear stylistic and iconographic continuities with earlier Olmec art and the later art of the Classic Maya (fig. 1.3).² The stylistic and iconographic traits that comprise the Izapan style, however, also extend to contemporaneous stone carvings from sites located throughout the highlands and coastal piedmont of Chiapas and Guatemala, along the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and into the valleys of central Veracruz, Mexico.³

Despite the fact that monuments carved in the Izapan style are found throughout a broad and ethnically diverse geographic region of Mesoamerica, their repertoire of images, symbols, narratives, and stylistic traits coheres into a

remarkably consistent sculptural corpus that provides a unique glimpse into the types of messages that were broadcast across the sacred landscapes of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica. These messages articulated political ideologies and complex cosmological themes, and formed a shared language of power that was employed by rulers in a dynamic Late Preclassic communication sphere. The focus of this study is the content, context, and active role of a specific subset of these monuments, which depict rulers performing in the guise of an avian deity, within the physical geography of Late Preclassic site centers.

In recent years, scholars have made dramatic strides in understanding the function of monumental sculpture as an ideological tool—one that literally gave voice to potent messages of authority and the relationship of humans to the cosmos—among the Maya and Aztecs of the Classic and Postclassic periods. However, the parallel role of sculpture during the Late Preclassic period has been relatively neglected. Traditionally, the Late Preclassic period has been understood as a strictly developmental period that fueled the later cultural florescence of the Classic period. This period’s alternative designation, “Late Formative,” is likewise laden with an evolutionary bias that connotes a lack of maturation and sophistication.⁴ More recently, scholarship addressing the archaeology,

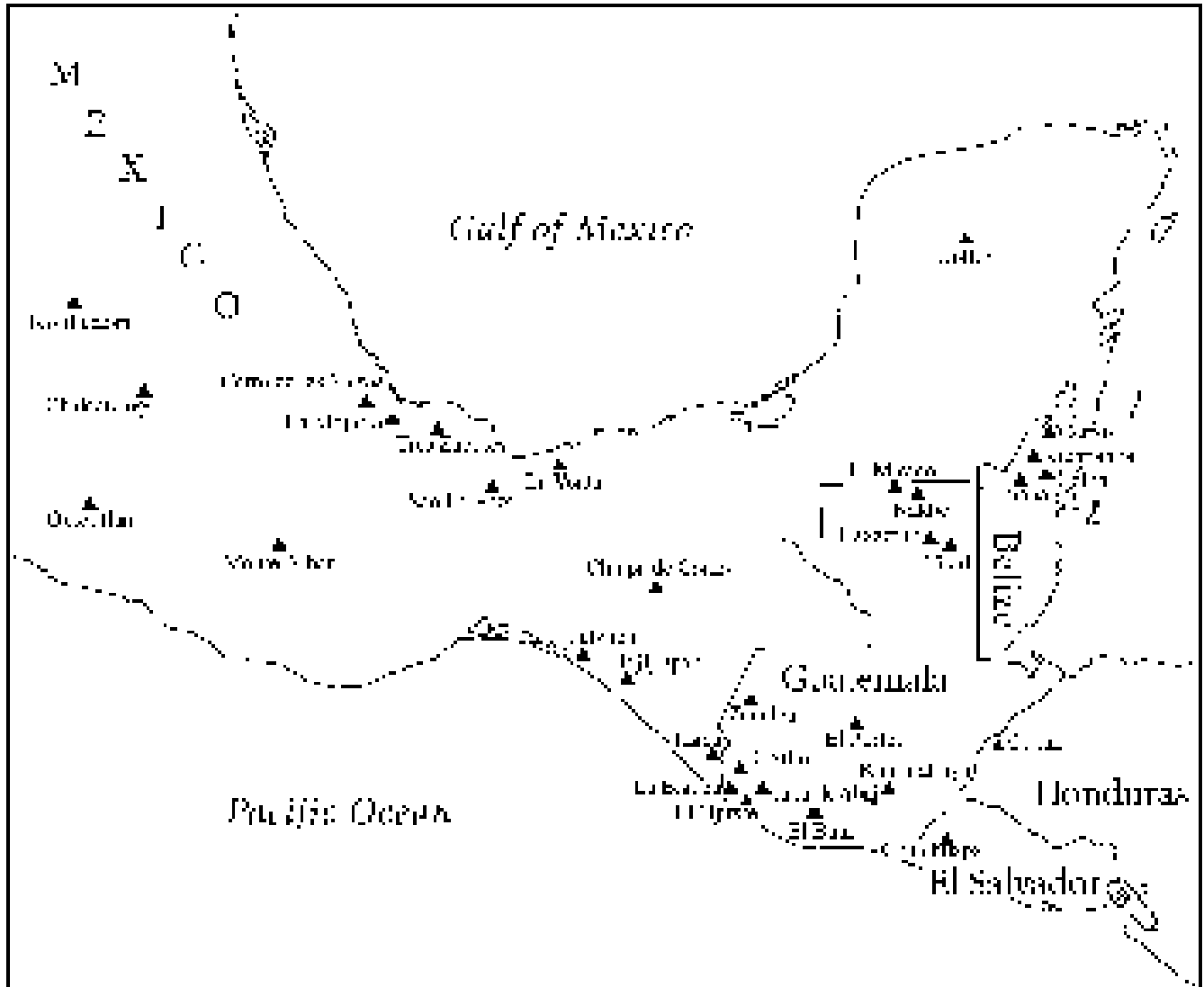


Fig. 1.1. Map of Mesoamerica showing location of major sites mentioned in text.

linguistics, and iconography of this period has demonstrated that it was, indeed, more than simply “formative.”⁵ In fact, the Late Preclassic period represents a mature expression of civilization that prefigures the better understood and more clearly defined Classic-period manifestation. As Joyce and Grove (1999a: 2) stated in the introduction to their investigation of social patterns in Mesoamerica, “Every later Mesoamerican society developed within a framework that was laid in the Preclassic. The material features that we see archaeologically as typical of Mesoamerica took their essential form during this period.”

In order to understand fully the role of the Izapan style phenomenon within this matrix, its presence within the political, economic, and social landscape of the Late Preclassic period must be determined. It is the premise of this study that the messages encoded on Izapan style monuments were part of a currency of elite ideological exchange that was shared across southeastern Mesoamerica and into regions to the north and west. Moreover, this novel mode of artistic expression structured and gave tangible form to notions of Late Preclassic political authority, economic and ideological interchange, and social cohesion. As a prelude to an

in-depth examination of the Izapan style phenomenon, this chapter explores several of the major cultural developments that characterized the Late Preclassic period, some of which demonstrate patterns of continuity while others are more difficult to define. Issues such as the spread of hieroglyphic literacy, networks of communication, and displays of conspicuous consumption—which include the erection of monumental sculpture and architecture—are considered.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PICTURE

Archaeological excavations, particularly since the 1960s, have revolutionized our understanding of the extent and complexity of the Late Preclassic period in eastern Mesoamerica. For example, in the Maya region—which includes Guatemala, Belize, the eastern portion of Mexico and the western boundaries of Honduras and El Salvador (fig. 1.1)—the Late Preclassic was a vibrant period



Fig. 1.2. View of stela-altar pair at Izapa. Stela 3 and Altar 2. Photo by Richard Stewart from Stirling 1943: Plate 50A. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.



Fig. 1.3. Izapa Stela 5. Photo by Richard Stewart. From Stirling 1943: Plate 52. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

of cultural, economic, and social development. Archaeological data indicate that populations, particularly in the areas of northern Belize and the central Peten, were expanding.⁶ Corresponding to this population growth was an increase in the construction of monumental architecture, more massive and ornate than in the preceding Middle Preclassic period. This is best evidenced by the Tigre pyramid at El Mirador, Peten, Guatemala, which is estimated to have covered an area of 19,600 square meters (Hansen 1998: 76; 2000: 62). Concurrently, the density of structures also increased in site centers and their surrounding plazas, establishing a pattern of residential architecture that would continue throughout the Classic period (Demarest 1984; Hansen 1998: 77).

In order to support these burgeoning popula-

tions, intensive agriculture was undertaken. In some regions, cultivated fields often were irrigated by means of hydraulic engineering systems that testify to sophisticated, developing technologies. Complementing the Late Preclassic economy were specialized communities such as that of Colha, which capitalized on available natural resources by mass-producing stone tools from local chert sources (Hester, Shafer, and Eaton 1994). Recent investigations suggest that the Colha elite were involved as well in the production and consumption of cacao, the chocolate bean used to create a beverage that was consumed primarily by the ruling elite during the Classic period (Hurst et al. 2002: 289). Patterns of ritual behavior, such as the ceremonial use of cacao, certainly were exchanged in conjunction with utilitarian and luxury goods during this Late Preclassic period, laying the foundations for ritualized activities better documented during the Classic period.⁷

In fact, extensive trade networks linked various Late Preclassic Maya and non-Maya sites and gave rise to regional trading centers. For example, the location of Cerros in northern Belize at the mouth of the New River where it empties into Chetumal Bay enabled it to control trade between the coast and inland.⁸ Upriver was the site of Lamanai, whose Late Preclassic population availed itself of rich aquatic resources and riverine transportation routes. Lamanai was strategically located to take advantage of trade routes that extended down into the Southern Lowlands and Peten as well as up into the Northern Lowlands of modern Campeche and Quintana Roo (Guderjan and Williams-Beck 2001; Pendergast 1981; Powis 2002). In the Peten, archaeological assemblages from sites such as Nakbe and El Mirador demonstrate that the elites there had entered into systems of economic interaction through which they received obsidian from highland Guatemala and strombus shells from the Caribbean (Clark and Hansen 2001: 15). Archaeological data throughout these regions attest to the considerable control that Maya elites exerted during the Late Preclassic period in the long-distance trade of specific commodities, including jade and other greenstones,

obsidian and stone tools, pyrite, strombus and spondylus shells, and even feathers from exotic birds such as the quetzal.

Throughout the Maya area during this time period, the archaeological record has preserved innumerable acts of conspicuous consumption that were invested with ritual significance. These range from special burial treatment replete with high-status grave goods to caches of precious objects such as jade and greenstone. On a grander scale, they include the long causeways, or *sacbeob*, that linked site cores to their peripheries and accommodated ritual processions. *Sacbeob* are, after all, as Lekson (n.d.) described for the American Southwest, "long, linear monuments that we call roads." They also include the monumental stone sculpture and magnificently adorned stucco architectural facades that required the expertise of highly skilled artisans. These examples testify to a considerable degree of economic power exercised by the elite, who commanded labor and controlled limited resources in both public and private domains.⁹ However, elite manipulation of sculpture and architecture was more than just a reactionary response to economic well-being or an ostentatious display of wealth: these forms of artistic expression carried social, political, and cosmological messages that structured the space and worldview of the inhabitants of these Late Preclassic Maya sites.¹⁰

A comparable scenario characterized the Pacific coastal plains and piedmont during the Late Preclassic period. This region (fig. 1.1), which stretches from Chiapas through Guatemala and into western El Salvador, was home to both ethnic Maya and Mixe-Zoque peoples, among others.¹¹ Certain sites, such as Izapa and Takalik Abaj, represented critically important crossroads of communication during the Late Preclassic between Mayan speakers to the east and Mixe-Zoquean-speaking peoples to the west. These sites also occupied advantageous locations along communication and trade routes between the Pacific Coast and the interior.

Izapa, for example, appears to have been an important Late Preclassic political center within

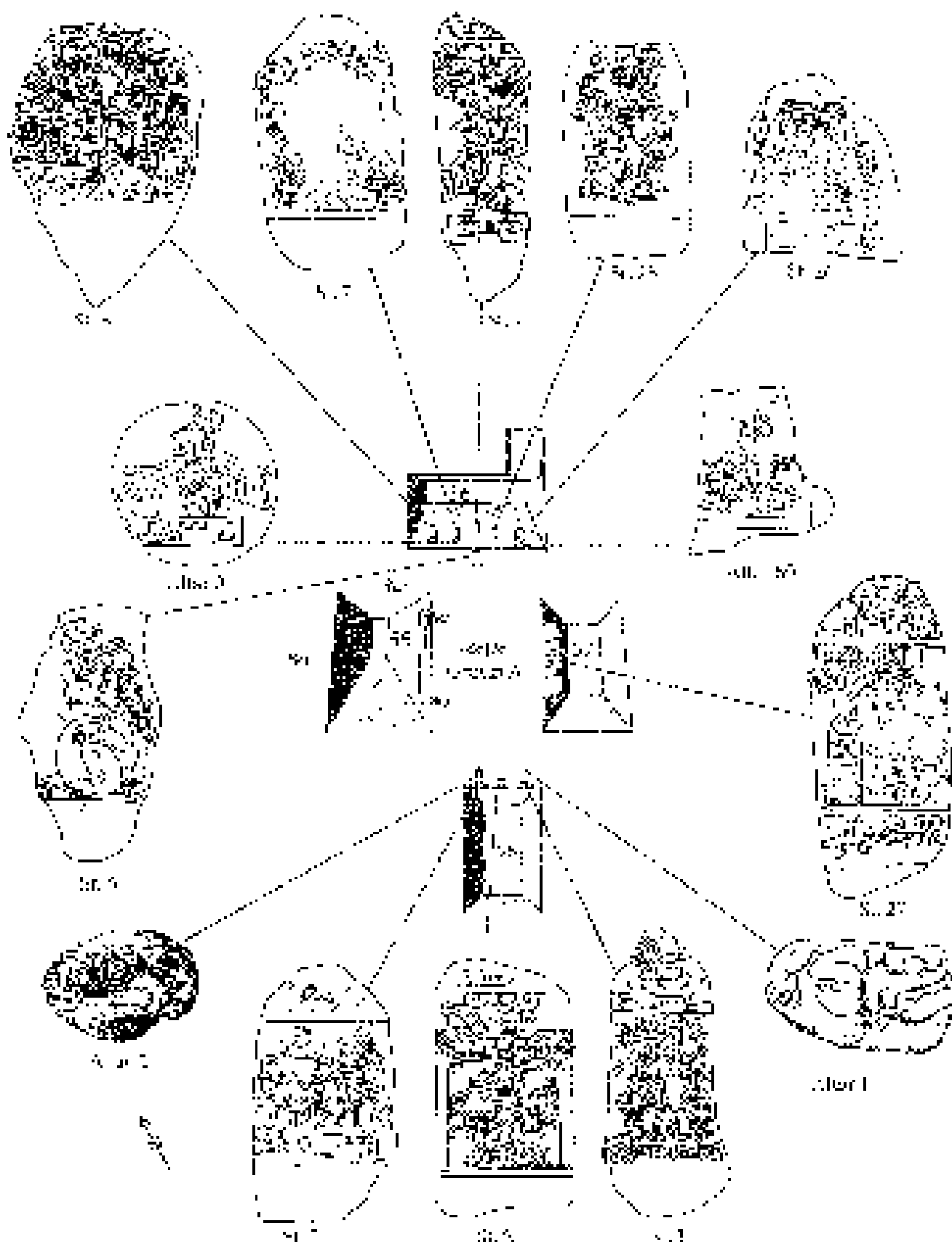


Figure 1.4. Schematic rendering of Group A at Izapa, showing location of major monuments, after Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: Fig. 8.1.

the Soconusco region, famed for its rich volcanic soils and cacao production (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 312). It reached the apex of its growth during the Late Preclassic period, which was marked by massive construction and sculptural activity. Like their Maya neighbors to the east, the elite at Izapa—who may have spoken a Mixe-Zoquean language¹²—participated in similar ritualized acts of conspicuous consumption that included, most notably, the construction of pyramids and elaborate plazas lined with ornately carved stelae and altars (fig. 1.4). Importantly, many of the symbols and themes carved upon the monuments were not unique to Izapa, but were shared by other sites such as Takalik Abaj approximately fifty kilometers to the east.

Takalik Abaj, which already by the Middle Preclassic period possessed a significant array of Olmec-style sculpture, appears to have been ethnically Maya by the Late Preclassic period.¹³ It, too, rose to a position of regional prominence during the Late Preclassic, during which time extensive construction of plazas, terraces, and monumental structures took place. Like Izapa, the public spaces of the site were filled with monuments, commissioned by the elite, which featured rulers and mythic scenes that bear intriguing affinities to specific sculptures at Izapa. Takalik Abaj's location in the sloping piedmont, on a natural communication corridor between the adjacent Guatemalan Highlands and the coastal plain, undoubtedly contributed to its importance within the Late Preclassic political landscape. The formal and iconographic relationships between its corpus of Late Preclassic monuments and those at Izapa also confirm that a specific and recurring repertoire of symbols and narratives successfully transcended political boundaries and ethnic divisions at this time. Moreover, this vocabulary of power—which not only stated a ruler's political might, but also advertised his control over the supernatural realm—was literally carved in stone and placed in hallowed site centers where it formulated and structured the ideological currents of the Late Preclassic period.

Also participating in this dynamic interaction

sphere were the elites of Kaminaljuyu, whose site dominated the Guatemalan Highlands region. Recent epigraphic investigations indicate that the inhabitants of Kaminaljuyu spoke a Mayan language (Fahsen 1999, 2000; Valdés and Wright 2004).¹⁴ Importantly, certain monuments from that site display the same symbolic vocabulary found at Izapa and Takalik Abaj, which strongly indicates that it, too, was an active participant in this southeastern Mesoamerican communication sphere (Guernsey Kappelman 1997, 2001; Kaplan 1995; Parsons 1986). Contributing to Kaminaljuyu's success was its optimal location at a natural pass between the Pacific Coast and interior of Guatemala. Recent excavations at the site also have demonstrated the presence of elaborate systems of water management and hydraulic engineering that enabled the establishment of a stable agricultural base that, in turn, attracted a growing population and contributed to developing commercial interests (Barrientos 1999; Popenoe de Hatch et al. 2002; Valdés 2002; Valdés and Popenoe de Hatch 1996; Valdés and Wright 2004).

Kaminaljuyu's role as the principal polity within the Southern Highlands appears to have been closely linked to its control of obsidian distribution into the Maya Lowlands of the Peten from two sources in the Guatemalan Highlands, San Martín Jilotepeque and El Chayal, both located not far from Kaminaljuyu (Michels 1979; Nelson 1985: 39).¹⁵ During the Late Preclassic period, obsidian was imported primarily from San Martín Jilotepeque, revealing a shift away from El Chayal, which had been the dominant source of obsidian prior to this period (Clark, Lee, and Salcedo 1989). Most tellingly, obsidian from San Martín Jilotepeque appears in the Late Preclassic archaeological record of sites not only in the Guatemalan Highlands and Maya Lowlands, but also along the Pacific Coast and the interior of Chiapas, indicating the extent of this network of distribution (Clark, Lee, and Salcedo 1989: 275–276). Importantly, as Clark, Lee, and Salcedo (1989: 272–275) discussed, when the availability of high-quality Guatemalan Highland obsidian fluctuated, another important source was the volcano Taju-

mulco, located just to the east of Izapa in Guatemala. Although Tajumulco obsidian was of a lesser quality, it nonetheless was used throughout the Late Preclassic period, particularly at Izapa, as an alternative resource. Evidence such as this indicates that changing patterns in the control and distribution of these natural resources were directly linked to the evolving political landscape of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica.¹⁶

At Kaminaljuyu the control of limited resources and regional trade routes had immediate societal ramifications, as evidenced by two extraordinarily rich Late Preclassic tombs at the site.¹⁷ These interments, which date to consecutive construction phases, were placed within Mound E-III-3, the largest structure at Kaminaljuyu. The scale of Mound E-III-3, as well as its function as a mortuary monument for what appear to represent two successive rulers (Shook and Popenoe de Hatch 1999: 304), indicates that Kaminaljuyu's political power, by this point in time, was concentrated in the hands of individual rulers who wielded the power to commission—or coerce—the construction of monumental architecture (cf. Shook and Kidder 1952; Valdés and Rodríguez 1999: 145; Valdés and Wright 2004). Likewise, exquisitely carved monuments from the same Late Preclassic period at Kaminaljuyu bear witness to the messages of authority that were transmitted throughout the ritual precinct. Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 (fig. 1.5), for instance, depicts a standing figure who wields a chipped flint ax remarkably similar to one recovered from Tomb I in Mound E-III-3, which suggests that the individual portrayed was one of the Late Preclassic rulers interred within the structure (Parsons 1986: 66; Shook and Kidder 1952: fig. 79c). Images such as Stela 10 articulated a message of political authority to local populations but also undoubtedly operated within a broader, regional network of rhetoric, competition, and exchange.¹⁸

For example, Monument 1 at Chocóla—a contemporaneous Late Preclassic site located on the sloping piedmont between Takalik Abaj and Kaminaljuyu—compares closely to Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 (Parsons 1986: 70; Prater 1989: 128;



Figure 1.5. Kaminaljuyu Stela 10. Photo by Michael Love.

Valdés et al. 2004). Elites at Chocóla, like their neighbors, appear to have taken advantage of the site's location along an important communication corridor; this same setting enabled the cultivation of cacao in the rich agricultural fields of the piedmont. Recent excavations at the site have also revealed extensive water management systems, artificial terracing, and a carefully orchestrated astronomical orientation for the central ceremonial precinct (Kaplan, Valdés, and Gutiérrez n.d.; Paredes Umaña et al. n.d.).

Another region absolutely critical to this Late Preclassic communication sphere was the northern Maya Highlands, which straddled a natural communication route between the southern Guatemalan Highlands and the Maya Lowlands to the north (Kidder 1940; Sharer 1989: 258; Sharer and Sedat 1987, 1999). Sites such as El Portón in the Salamá Valley witnessed increasing sociopolitical complexity during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition, as evidenced by large-scale ceremonial centers and sculpture (Sharer and

Sedat 1973, 1987, 1999). El Portón Monument 1 (fig. 1.6A), for instance, bears an early hieroglyphic inscription, while its form attests to the site's participation in the rapidly expanding stela phenomenon that characterized the end of the Middle Preclassic and gained momentum in the ensuing Late Preclassic period.

Paths of communication throughout Late Preclassic Mesoamerica also extended into the region traditionally referred to as the "southeastern periphery," which included southeastern Guatemala, western Honduras, and El Salvador.¹⁹ For example, the site of Chalchuapa, El Salvador, which is located approximately 120 kilometers southeast of Kaminaljuyu and was first occupied during the Early Preclassic period, became a focal point of construction activity during the Late Preclassic period (Sharer 1978). At that time a large pyramid and a series of plazas and ceremonial platforms were erected and accompanied by monumental stone sculpture, an example of which, Monument 1, contains an early Maya hieroglyphic inscription (fig. 1.6B) (Sharer 1974).

Although Monument 1 is stylistically distinct from Izapan monuments, it demonstrates Chalchuapa's participation in emerging Late Preclassic writing systems (Graham 1971).²⁰

Without a doubt, the archaeological evidence and iconographic record of shared symbols and themes clearly demonstrate corridors of influence and communication throughout southeastern Mesoamerica. However, these paths also extended to the north and west, stretching through the Upper Grijalva River region of Chiapas and into portions of Veracruz. In these Mixe-Zoque regions, at sites such as Chiapa de Corzo and Tres Zapotes, there is evidence of interaction at many different levels, including shared ceramic assemblages as well as common symbol systems on their monumental sculpture.²¹ In particular, the practice of erecting carved stone stelae is well documented at the site of Chiapa de Corzo (Lee 1969). There, several stelae, each intricately carved with abstract horizontal designs, compare closely to stelae from Izapa (fig. 1.7). In both cases, these designs mimic textiles, and bear testimony to shared iconographic

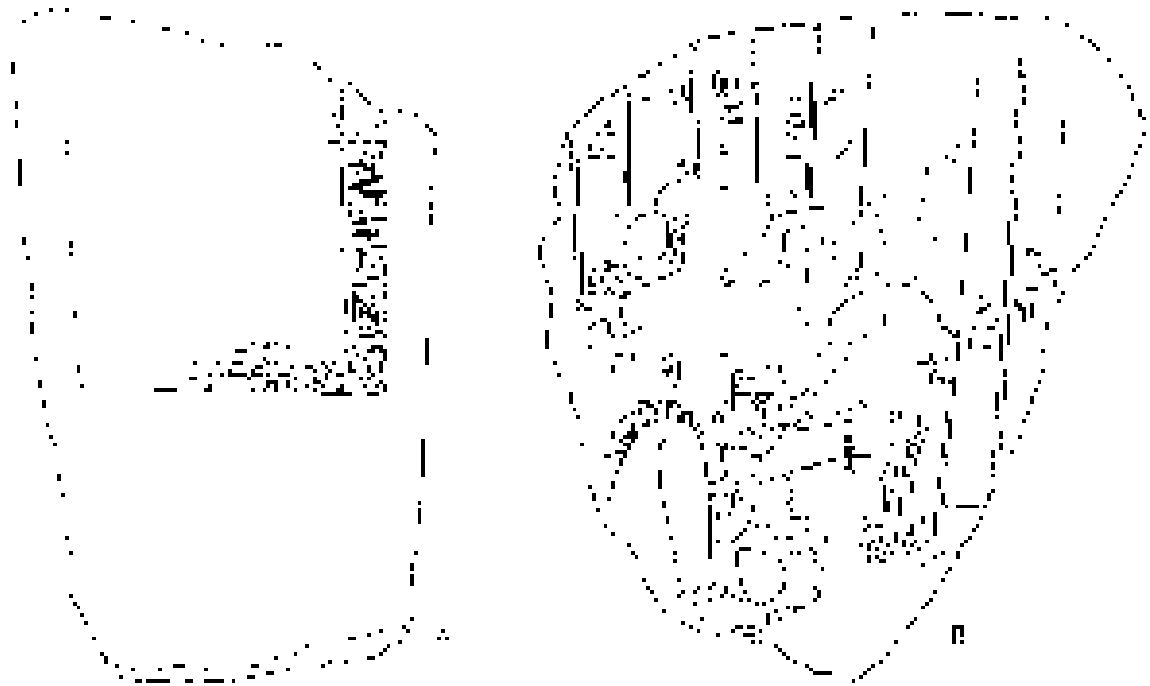


Figure 1.6. Examples of monuments from greater regional communication sphere: A, El Portón Monument 1 (drawing by William R. Coe, from Sharer and Sedat 1987: Plate 18.1); B, Chalchuapa Monument 1 (drawing by William R. Coe, from Sharer 1978: Fig. 2a).

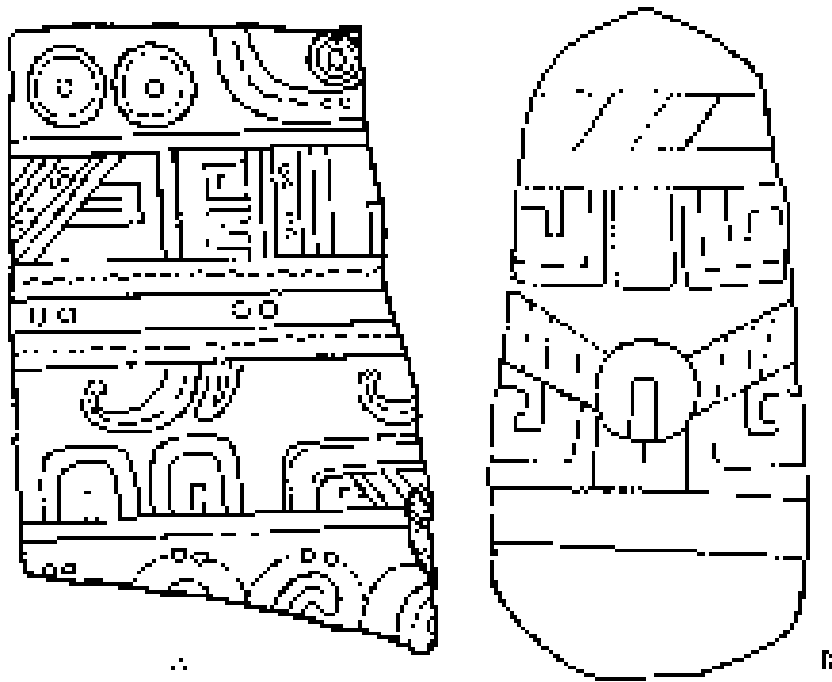


Figure 1.7. Comparison of carved textile designs on stelae: A, Chiapa de Corzo Stela 3 (drawing by author after Lee 1969: Fig. 61.); B, Izapa Stela 19 (drawing by Ajax Moreno, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation).

systems that were linked to expressions of rulership and sacredness.²² In fact, much of the imagery from Chiapa de Corzo depicts typical Late Preclassic symbols of authority better known from southeastern Mesoamerica and confirms its participation within well-established communication spheres at this time.

Of particular pertinence to this study is the fact that many of the symbols invoked across southeastern Mesoamerica as well as to the north and west carried specific associations with the office of rulership and were part of Late Preclassic political dialogues in a variety of linguistic regions. Perhaps even more importantly, analysis of such symbol systems, the monuments on which they appear, and their context within the built environment provides valuable insight into patterns of ritual behavior that were held in common by Late Preclassic elites. In other words, ephemeral events such as ritual performances were preserved through a dynamic visual vocabulary of motifs, shapes, and mediums. Accordingly, these monuments and their repertoire of symbols represent more than mute testimony, written in stone, to events that were soon forgotten. They must be understood as protagonists—albeit stone ones—that structured sacred space and delivered power-

ful messages to a diverse Late Preclassic audience.

Nonetheless, despite evidence of broad communication networks and their implications with regards to rulership, the nature of Late Preclassic ideological expressions remains enigmatic. For example, along the Guatemalan coast only about forty kilometers southwest of Takalik Abaj, the large urban center of El Ujuxte also developed during the Late Preclassic period (Love 1999a, 2002a, 2002b). However, in stark contrast to regional neighbors such as Takalik Abaj and Izapa, El Ujuxte produced no known monumental carved stone sculpture during its florescence.²³ Such a situation challenges assumptions about how best to define the character of a Late Preclassic, southeastern Mesoamerican interaction sphere.²⁴ While most of this expansive site was carefully laid out according to an astronomically oriented gridlike pattern—surely attesting to some form of centralized authority, as Love (1998, 1999a: 146, 2002a) suggested—the elite at El Ujuxte did not express notions of power and authority through the medium of monumental carved sculpture or hieroglyphic inscriptions. Yet, the very sophistication of their urban landscape is equal to, or even surpasses, that of other primary centers that *did* employ monumental sculptural

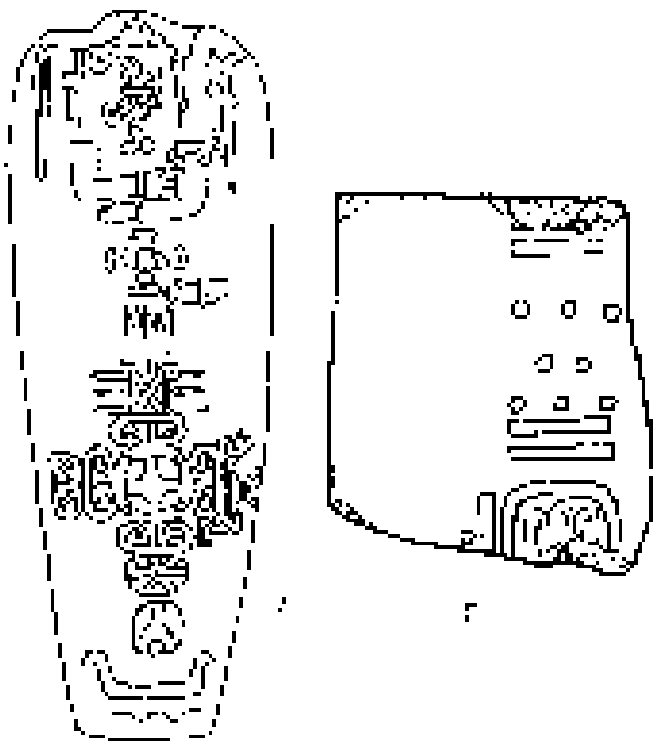


Figure 1.8. Example of Middle Preclassic iconic system and the earliest-known Long Count date on a Late Preclassic stela: A, The Humboldt Celt (drawing by F. Kent Reilly III); B, Chiapa de Corzo Stela 2 (drawing by author after Lee 1969: Fig. 60).

assemblages replete with messages of rulership and cosmic authority.

A similar scenario characterized other Late Preclassic sites located to the south along the Pacific Coast of Guatemala.²⁵ Bove (n.d.b) suggested that rulership throughout this region was expressed principally through large-scale construction projects and astronomical alignments rather than monumental sculpture, a situation that he characterized as a “corporate embodiment of authority.” Yet, as he further cautioned, such generalizations do not necessarily accommodate the existence of carved monuments or alternative sculptural expressions of authority such as plain stelae or “potbelly” sculptures at many of these coastal sites.²⁶

While many puzzles concerning the nature of the Late Preclassic period in southeastern Mesoamerica still remain, it is only by literally piecing together the archaeological, stylistic, and iconographic evidence that a more complete picture of

the environment can emerge. And this picture, despite its gaps and incongruities, is not one of an unsophisticated “formative” landscape that pales next to the accomplishments of the “mature” Classic period. Rather, the evidence reveals a dynamic, multiethnic interaction sphere that included not only the dissemination of tangible goods, but the communication of symbolic ideas as well.²⁷

THE ADVENT OF HIEROGLYPHIC WRITING

Critical to these systems of communication during the Late Preclassic period was the development of hieroglyphic texts and calendrical records sometime between the years 1100 to 600 BC. This phenomenon undoubtedly grew out of the already well-developed iconic system of the Middle Preclassic Olmec, such as that depicted on the famous Humboldt Celt (fig. 1.8A) (Coe 1965, 1976; Justeson 1986; Justeson and Mathews 1990; Proskouriakoff 1971).²⁸ As Justeson (1986: 443) noted, the emergent writing systems of Oaxaca and southeastern Mesoamerica were linked conceptually to visual systems that were employed to “legitimate and reinforce elite power and prestige; . . . [which] would remain the principal function of Mesoamerican writing.”

It was during the early years of the Late Preclassic period that hieroglyphic writing began to appear regularly in southeastern Mesoamerica and the Isthmus region. A sherd from the fill in Mound 5b at the site of Chiapa de Corzo in the Upper Grijalva River valley of Chiapas, dated to Chiapa IV–V (Francesca–Guanacaste phases, or the Late Preclassic period), contains a fragmentary inscription (Méluzin 1995: fig. 5). This evidence indicates that, already during the Late Preclassic period, writing was in full bloom, and that the development of hieroglyphic script traditions must have taken place much earlier, during the Middle Preclassic period at the very latest.²⁹ One of the hallmarks of early script traditions in this region was the use of the Long Count, a type of calendrical notation that counts the number of days elapsed since a set base date. The earliest known

Long Count date appears on Stela 2 from Chiapa de Corzo (fig. 1.8B) and corresponds to a day in the year 36 BC, while Stela C from the site of Tres Zapotes in Veracruz bears a Long Count date five years later (Coe 1957a: 598–599; Marcus 1976: 49–53; Stirling 1940: 4). Both of these monuments are non-Maya, from sites located in traditionally Mixe-Zoquean-speaking regions.

Writing also appeared at the Pacific piedmont sites of Takalik Abaj and El Baúl during the Late Preclassic period. Takalik Abaj Stela 5 (fig. 1.9) bears two Long Count dates that fall within the year AD 126.³⁰ An even earlier, although incomplete, Long Count date also appears on fragmentary Stela 2 (Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1978: 90–91).³¹ Stela 50 may contain an equally early, although again fragmentary, Long Count date as well (Graham 1989: 239 n. 2; Guernsey and Love 2005). Although the small corpus of noncalendrical glyphs at the site of Takalik Abaj makes it difficult to analyze what language was spoken at the site during the Late Preclassic period, Stela 5 may bear the kingly title *ajaw* spelled in a Mayan language, which would suggest that Takalik Abaj was occupied by Mayan speakers during this period.³² The Long Count date inscribed on El Baúl Stela 1, which also appears to be inscribed in a Mayan language, corresponds to the year AD 36.³³

Monuments from Kaminaljuyu also bear hieroglyphic inscriptions. The elaborately carved Stela 10 (fig. 1.5), which dates to the Late Preclassic period, is incised with a lengthy series of glyphs that includes bar-and-dot numbers but lacks a Long Count date. While Fahsen (1999, 2000: 90, n.d.) recently argued that the inscription on Stela 10 was written in Ch'olan, a Mayan language,³⁴ Justeson and Kaufman (1993) suggested that the text may represent a Mayanized form of Mixe-Zoquean, or even possibly a script that incorporated both languages (Kaufman and Justeson 2001: 31). In a similar vein, Mora-Marín (2001) pointed to comparable epithet structures between the text of Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 and Classic Mayan inscriptions, which would suggest a Mayan language, but also noted that only slight variations in the same epithet structure characterize the Late



Figure 1.9. Takalik Abaj Stela 5. Photo by author.

Preclassic text of La Mojarra Stela 1 from the Mixe-Zoque region. Despite the limited number of inscriptions available to test these various hypotheses, it is increasingly apparent that, during this Late Preclassic period, Mayan and Mixe-Zoquean speakers freely borrowed signs from one another (Kaufman and Justeson 2001; Mora-Marín n.d.). Moreover, the complexity of this situation at Kaminaljuyu suggests that this site in particular may have been a key point of interaction between the two linguistic traditions (Mora-Marín 2001; Kathryn Josserand, personal communication 2003).

While writing appears in clearly non-Maya



Figure 1.10. Examples of early writing from Mayan-speaking regions: A, El Mirador ceramic sherd (drawing by David Mora-Marín); B, Kichpanha bone (drawing by Peter Mathews); C, Takalik Abaj Monument 11 (drawing by James Porter, courtesy of John Graham and the University of California, Berkeley).

regions of southeastern Mesoamerica by the first century BC, and at probable Mayan-speaking sites along the Pacific Coast by the first century AD, there is also intriguing evidence for early writing in the Maya Lowlands during this same Late Preclassic period. For example, an early *ajaw* glyph appears on a Late Preclassic ceramic sherd from El Mirador (fig. 1.10A).³⁵ As Fields (1989: 51) observed, similar early *ajaw* forms appear on the stucco facade of Cerros Structure 5C-2nd.³⁶ More recently, Stuart (n.d.) suggested that certain stucco mask facades in the Lowlands, such as those on Late Preclassic El Mirador Structure 34 (Hansen 1990), may contain nominal elements that were tied to evolving script traditions, and that presaged Early Classic developments such as the monumental embellishing of a ruler's name in modeled stucco on the Margarita substructure at Copán (Sharer et al. 1999). Within the medium of stone stelae, Hansen (1990) likewise proposed a Late Preclassic date for El Mirador Stela 2, which contains a badly eroded hieroglyphic text.³⁷ Ongoing investigations at San Bartolo, Guatemala, which have already recovered evidence for early writing

in exceptionally well-preserved murals at the site, may push back even earlier the dates for the appearance of writing in the Maya Lowlands region (Saturno, Taube, and Stuart 2005: 41).

Perhaps even more fascinating are the paths of communication between the Maya Highlands and Lowlands that are implied by some of these early Lowland texts. An excellent example of this is the Kichpanha bone (fig. 1.10B) (Fahsen 1995: 152; Mora-Marín 2001: 310–311). Gibson, Shaw, and Finamore (1986: 11) dated the archaeological context of the bone to circa 100 BC–AD 100, although more recent reanalysis of the associated ceramics suggests a date of circa AD 150 or later (Meskill 1992; Reese 1989; Reese-Taylor and Walker 2002: 100). Most interestingly, the inscribed glyphs on the Kichpanha bone bear a



Figure 1.11. The Hauberg Stela. Photo by Justin Kerr.

striking correspondence to an inscription on Takalik Abaj Monument 11, which can be dated to the Late Preclassic period on a stylistic basis (fig. 1.10C).³⁸ As Mora-Marín (2001: 306–326) detailed, such evidence not only indicates a significant degree of interaction between Highland and Lowland Maya scribes during the Late Preclassic period, but also suggests that long-distance trade of objects like the Kichpanha bone contributed to the development and dissemination of writing during the Preclassic period.

The miniature Hauberg Stela (fig. 1.11), an unprovenienced monument undoubtedly from the Maya Lowlands, also bears a hieroglyphic inscription that, although lacking a Long Count date, bears a Calendar Round date that has been correlated to the year AD 197 (Schele, Mathews, and Lounsbury 1990; cf. Houston 2000: 146). The stela depicts a ruler in a posture and performance mode that would become part of a standardized lexis of authority during the Classic period: in his arms he cradles a serpent that alludes to the scepter of authority among the Maya while also burping from its maw the head of a figure in a scene of otherworldly communication. The text records the fundamental facts—ruler's name, polity, and official ritual act—while the imagery reveals the ramifications of this ritual behavior.

Tikal Stela 29 (fig. 1.12), which records a Long Count date that corresponds to AD 292, is the earliest dated, archaeologically recovered monument in the Maya Lowlands (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982). It depicts a Tikal ruler, garbed in the royal regalia, communicating with an ancestor who looks down upon him from above. On both Tikal Stela 29 and the Hauberg Stela (fig. 1.11), the rulers are literally dripping with the ornaments of power. They are portrayed as individuals who not only wielded power in the natural world, but also could communicate with the supernatural sphere. The Hauberg Stela, moreover, demonstrates how writing was woven into the composition as a formal complement and as a source of supplemental, detailed information that enhanced and elucidated the context of royal performances.

With the advent and spread of writing

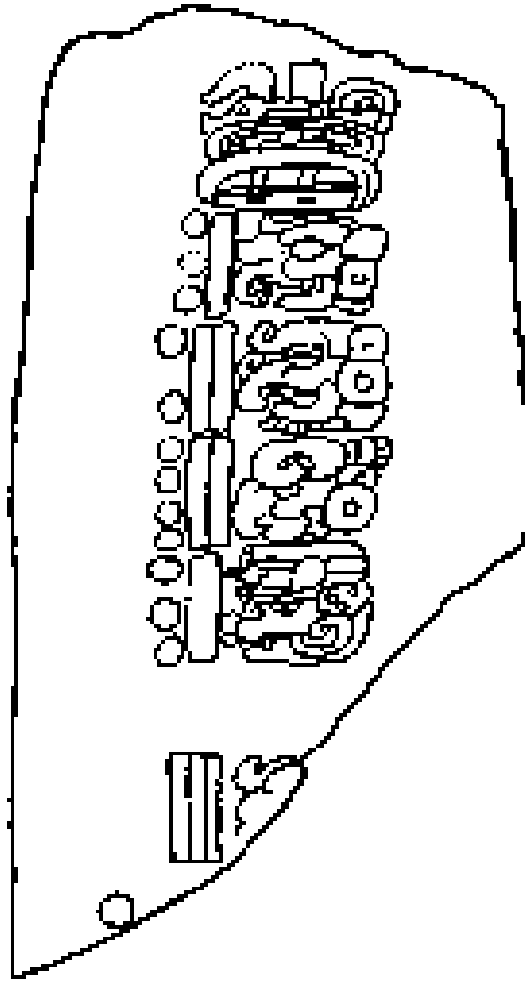


Figure 1.12. Tikal Stela 29, back. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

throughout different regions, the Late Preclassic thus represented the first period in ancient Mesoamerica in which dates, events, and the deeds of specific individuals were celebrated in script traditions carved onto stone. In fact, as scholars (Grube 1995; Justeson 1986) have argued, the act of writing was inextricably tied to the foundation of royal dynasties and the invention of divine kingship, a function also attested to in ancient China and Egypt. This is demonstrated by inscriptions from both Mayan- and Mixe-Zoquean-speaking regions that date to the end of the Late Preclassic period and glorify the deeds of specific rulers, placing their actions within broader contexts of calendrical cycles, astronomical phe-

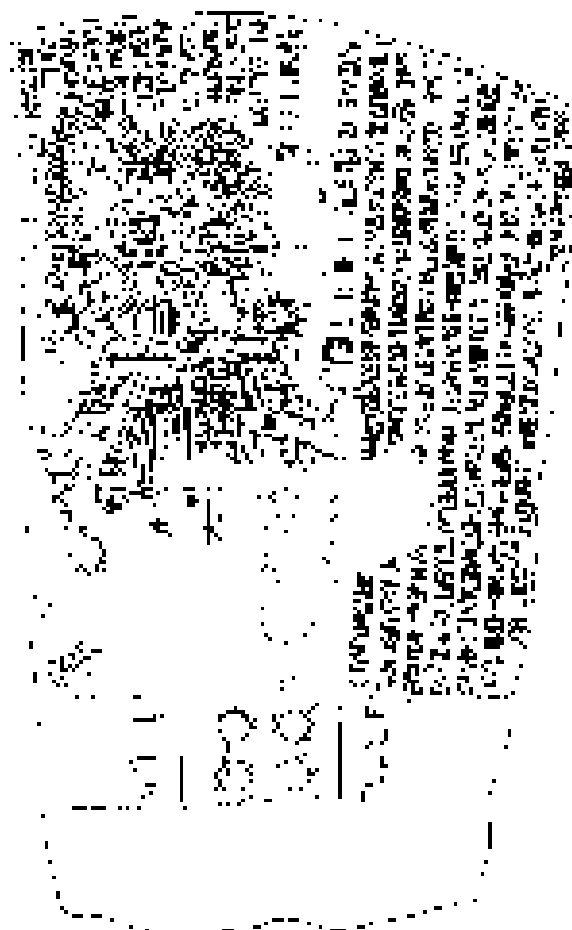


Figure 1.13. La Mojarra Stela 1. Drawing by George Stuart.

nomena, and cosmological events (Guernsey and Love 2005.).³⁹

La Mojarra Stela 1 (fig. 1.13) may provide another example of this practice in which the deeds of divine kings were recorded using hieroglyphic texts inscribed on monumental stelae. Stela 1 was pulled from the Acula River at the village of La Mojarra in Veracruz, which is located midway between Cerro de las Mesas and Tres Zapotes, and records Long Count dates in the years AD 143 and 156 (Winfield Capitaine 1988). The Isthmian script with which the stela is inscribed flourished in the Olmec heartland and throughout much of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec between circa 150 BC and AD 450.⁴⁰ Other sites whose monuments incorporate this script tradition include, among others, Tres Zapotes, Cerro de las Mesas, and San Andrés Tuxtla in the Olmec heartland, as well as Chiapa de Corzo in the

Upper Grijalva River valley of Chiapas and El Sitio, which was located along the Pacific slope of Guatemala (Justeson and Kaufman 1993: 1703, fig. 1; Méluzin 1995: 2–3). Significant, too, is the similarity between hieroglyphs in the text of La Mojarra Stela 1 and certain glyphlike forms on several stelae at the site of Izapa, which is otherwise notable for its almost complete lack of hieroglyphic writing.⁴¹ The relationship between the standing figure on Stela 1, presumably the ruler, and the adjacent hieroglyphic text is similar to that of the Hauberg Stela, and suggests that the composition formed a conceptual whole in which textual specifics were combined with iconographic and narrative devices to tell—and record in monumental form—the events associated with the reign of a specific Late Preclassic ruler.

What these various inscriptions also underscore is the extent and nature of Late Preclassic communication spheres. At the most basic level, the Isthmian and Mayan script traditions were related: their numerical and calendrical systems are virtually identical. Isthmian inscriptions like La Mojarra Stela 1 also exhibit a columnar format, which in the Maya region and Guatemalan Highlands was modified into a system of paired columns of text. Beyond purely formal similarities, however, the content of the inscriptions reveals a shared attention to recording and monumentalizing the office of divine kingship. This common language of power—which not only included hieroglyphic inscriptions but also encompassed a repertoire of imagery incorporating recognizable symbol systems and formal conventions—became absolutely central to the display and justification of hierarchical authority during the Late Preclassic period. Beyond elite legitimation, however, it addressed issues of social organization and the relationship between the natural world and supernatural sphere that helped to structure and define a Late Preclassic worldview.

Yet, such characterizations do not adequately address the lack of hieroglyphic writing at sites such as Izapa, nor the emphatic emphasis on imagery rather than text. Rather than signaling a lack of familiarity with hieroglyphic writing on the part of the Izapa elite, this absence should perhaps



Figure 1.14. Cerros Structure 5C-2nd, detail of lower east mask. Photo by David Freidel.

be understood as a deliberate choice in which political authority was expressed in visual terms—or through images—rather than textually, or through writing defined as visual speech.⁴² Such a choice would have offered one distinct advantage: it would not have been language dependent, but instead would have communicated effectively to audiences of diverse linguistic affiliations. This option by elites at Izapa to communicate with images rather than hieroglyphic texts provided a solution, and should not be dismissed as an evolutionary blunder or ignorant mistake: it afforded a widespread, accessible, and presumably successful nonverbal system of communication. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Izapa's position at the juncture of two linguistic regions may have fostered the penchant for nontextual communicative strategies rather than language-dependent ones (Guernsey and Love 2005).

MEDIUMS AND MODES OF EXPRESSION

This study explores the role of sculpture in the development and dissemination of a Late Preclassic language of power that stretched throughout a

geographically and linguistically diverse region. Along the Pacific piedmont and highlands of Guatemala, and throughout the entire Izapan style sphere, the preferred sculptural vehicle for these messages appears to have been the stela-altar tableau. Stelae emerged as a sculptural format by the end of the Middle Preclassic period, and by the Middle to Late Preclassic transition were paired frequently with plain or carved altars at their bases (fig. 1.2). The prepared surfaces and more regularized contours of stelae—compared to boulders or natural rock formations—accommodated increasingly complex narrative compositions (Clancy 1990: 27).⁴³ The more controlled form and human scale of stelae also more readily facilitated their transportation to and placement within a carefully constructed ceremonial precinct. Although the concern for unified programs of sculpture and architecture dates back to the Early Preclassic colossal heads of the Olmec, stelae became the primary vehicles for the transmission of symbolic imagery from the late Middle Preclassic through the Terminal Classic periods. While the stela form became more regularized during the course of its development, its associated imagery

varied considerably, from depictions of rulers, deities, and ceremonial occasions to abstracted designs of specific iconographic motifs.

In stark contrast to the Pacific piedmont and Guatemalan Highlands, the Maya Lowlands were characterized by monumental architectural facades during the Late Preclassic period. Although stelae are not absent from sculptural assemblages in this region, programs of elaborate architectural sculpture appear to have served as the primary format for public expression.⁴⁴ These architectural facades, typically composed of enormous deity heads modeled in stucco (fig. 1.14), differ distinctly from the stelae of the Pacific piedmont and highlands. While stelae often depicted rulers as protagonists in ritual action, the stucco facades typically depict not rulers, but their supernatural patrons. More than just architectural backdrops for political and religious performances, however, these facades were part of a genre of expressive media that communicated information to largely nonliterate, Late Preclassic Maya populations (Reese 1996). In addition to these monumental architectural facades, new discoveries in the Maya Lowlands indicate that mural programs may have provided another outlet of symbolic expression for Late Preclassic rulers in this region (Saturno n.d.; Saturno et al. 2001).⁴⁵ Mural programs readily accommodated more narrative compositions and provided an ideal counterpoint to the iconic monumentality of the architectural facades.

Regardless of the media—whether stucco facades, painted murals, or carved stelae—monuments throughout this Late Preclassic communication sphere punctuated space with their messages and indicated the conceptualization of a unified program of sculpture and architecture that demarcated sacred space. They functioned as communicative media that transmitted potent symbolic imagery and, occasionally, carefully constructed hieroglyphic texts. More significantly, they also gave form, quite literally, to the development of powerful Late Preclassic political and cosmological messages.

It was thus within this vibrant setting of Late

Preclassic Mesoamerica that the Izapan style developed and spread, permeating more-physical ethnic and political boundaries. Specifically because it was widely employed by elites at numerous sites, it provides a unique lens through which the Late Preclassic landscape can be viewed. The monuments themselves, scattered throughout a broad and diverse geographic region, make visible certain paths and modes of communication during this time period in Mesoamerican history. The monuments and their rich repertoire of imagery also provide insight into Late Preclassic symbolic vocabularies of elite authority, many of which were crystallized during this time period into a canon of forms that would endure for a millennium.

An adequate picture of the Late Preclassic political and economic sphere is imperative to understanding the greater context in which these monuments existed. Yet, the monuments and their messages were more than reactionary devices to the forces of economic wealth and distribution, political organization, or the control of limited natural resources or agriculturally productive land. To borrow Ringle's (1999: 214) words with regards to the monumental architecture of the Late Preclassic Maya, Izapan style monuments "fostered growth, prosperity, and political expansion," instead of simply responding to it. They were key players in the Late Preclassic landscape and actors upon the stage of history, participating within a dialogue of sculpture, architecture, and performer that formulated messages of rulership, power, social cohesion, and humans' relationship to the earth and supernatural sphere. As Kubler (1971: 167) once stated, "emergence"—or, in this case, the appearance of a coherent artistic tradition like that of the Izapan style—"is like the actor coming on in the prologue to the play. But unless he can say something of value to the audience they may walk out on him." The Izapan style not only debuted on the stage of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica, but forged a lasting imprint. It is this notion—of art as a dynamic, tangible force—that guides the ensuing discussion of the Izapan style phenomenon and its role within a broad, Late Preclassic interaction sphere.

THE SITE OF IZAPA IN CONTEXT

We spent a week at Izapa, which turned out to be an interesting and imposing site with numerous large mounds and curiously carved stelae with altars. The heat was intense while we worked during the most strenuous week we spent in the field. However, we located more than 30 stelae and altars and felt well repaid for our efforts.

—*Matthew Stirling 1941*

THE SOCONUSCO REGION

As discussed in the Introduction, the term “Izapan style” takes its name from the site of Izapa, which is located on the sloping piedmont above the Pacific coastal plain of modern Chiapas, Mexico. This Pacific coastal and piedmont zone, generally referred to as the Soconusco region, was renowned for its production of cacao, which flourished in the rich volcanic soils of the piedmont that received ample annual rainfall, enabling maximum agricultural productivity. During the Postclassic period, this Soconusco—or Xoconochco—region represented the most southeasterly extension of the Aztec Empire and stretched along the Pacific Coast from Tliltepec, near Tonalá in modern Chiapas, to the Río Tilapa just east of Ayutla, Guatemala (fig. 2.1) (Coe 1961: 15; Thompson 1943: 108; 1948: 10).¹

The backdrop to the Soconusco region is the rugged volcanic peaks of the southern Sierra Madres that run along the narrow Pacific coastal plain of Chiapas and extend down through Guatemala and into El Salvador (fig. 2.2). Numerous rivers drain this highland range, flow across the coastal plain, and empty into the Pacific Ocean, carrying with them the residue of ancient as well as more recent volcanic ash that to this day

continues to fertilize the sloping piedmont (Coe 1961: 7).

The transition from the highland mountain range to the coastal plain is marked, as the cool atmosphere of the higher elevations gives way to the hot and humid piedmont region (Coe 1961: 7; McBryde 1945: 5). The Franciscan chronicler Fray Alonso Ponce vividly described the tropical climate of Soconusco in 1586, as well as some of its more annoying inhabitants:

Due to these rivers and swamps and the excessive heat and the many orchards of cacao, there abound in that Province mosquitoes, which defend it bravely with their weapons so sharp and clever, and to defend themselves persecuted mankind uses beds with closed nets around them.²

During the pre-Hispanic era when travel was undertaken primarily by foot, the movement of people and goods from east to west was facilitated by interconnecting estuaries and canals along the coast that were navigable only during the dry season (Navarrete 1978: 80–81; Orellana 1995: 16). They were not, however, without certain dangers: Ponce de León, the governor of Soconusco, bluntly declared in his 1574 *Relación de la Provincia de Soconusco* that alligators made

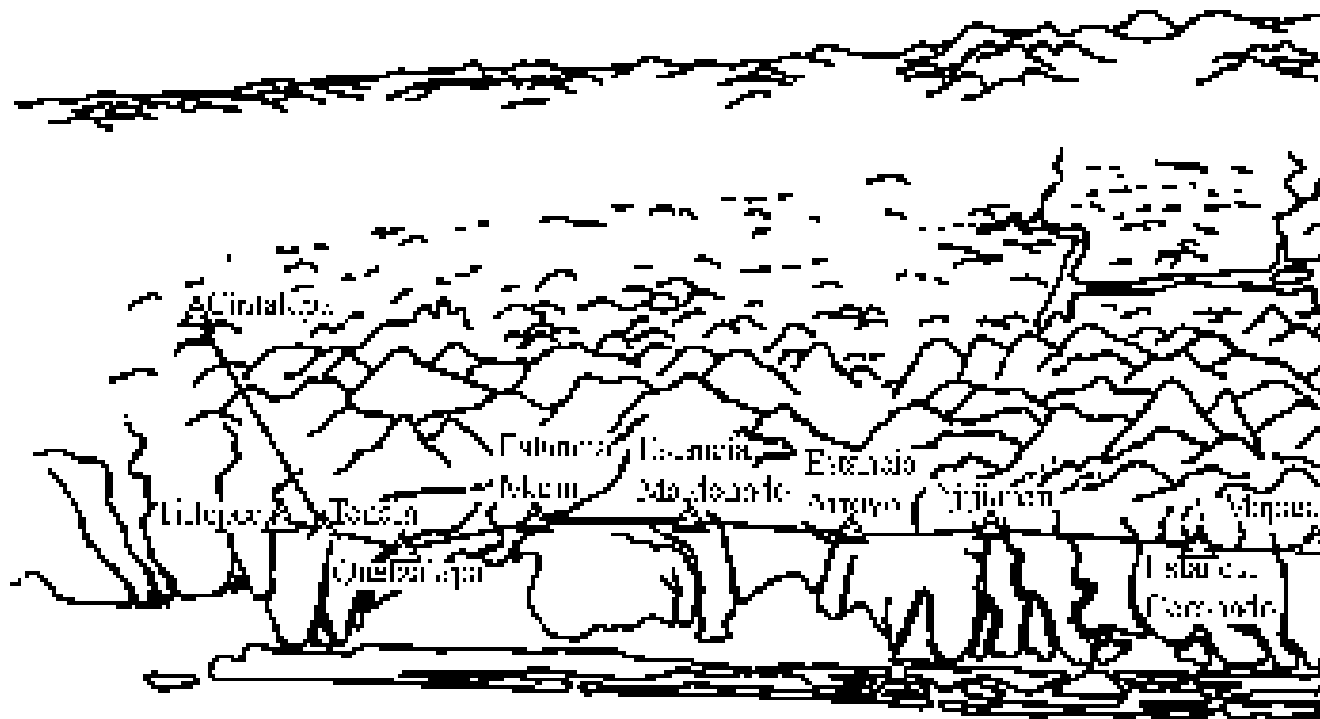


Figure 2.1. Map of the Soconusco region showing sixteenth-century travel routes. After Orellana 1995: Fig. 3.



Figure 2.2. View of the Sierra Madre volcanic range in the Soconusco region from north of La Blanca, Guatemala. Photo by author.

Extensive overland roads also existed. These traversed the coastal piedmont and extended into the rugged ranges of the southern Sierra Madres, connecting the sloping plains to the interior valleys of Chiapas and the highlands of Guatemala. From northwestern Soconusco, overland routes provided access to modern Oaxaca and the Gulf Coast (Navarrete 1978: 76–79). Indeed, the antiquity of these footpaths throughout the Pacific slope is attested by the numerous Olmec style objects and carvings documented from the Gulf Coast through modern Chiapas, Guatemala, and as far south as El Salvador. Such artifacts and monuments provide concrete evidence that these extensive trade routes were well established by the Early and Middle Preclassic periods.⁴

encountered while on his way to attack Utatlán, the K'iche' Maya capital in Guatemala. Regarding the route between Soconusco and the modern Department of Retalhuleu, Guatemala, Alvarado stated, "[It is] open and very wide, the highway as well as the crossroads" (Mackie 1924: 54). However, as he continued toward the higher elevations of Quezaltenango, Guatemala, Alvarado cautioned that the country became "thickly wooded, covered with trees and cocoa [*sic*] plantations," and difficult to traverse (Mackie 1924: 55).⁵ The significance of this passage through Soconusco, which accommodated communication networks between the Valley of Mexico and the Guatemalan coast, was reiterated in an account from 1595 that recorded the travels of Fray Tomás Torres:

19



Figure 2.3. Cacao trees at Izapa. Photo by author.

Such overland travels became hazardous during the rainy season, however, when rivers flowed down the mountainsides with such force that fording them was virtually impossible.

Within this tropical environment, numerous tall trees formed a forest canopy and provided the necessary shade for the cultivation of cacao (fig. 2.3). Fray Alonso Ponce described this aspect of Soconusco in 1586:

The cacao tree is very delicate and of such a nature that the sun ought not to hit it directly, or at least not the full sun, nor ought it to lack water if it is to live long and bear much fruit.

... For this reason, the Indians have their cacao orchards where there is water to irrigate them, and when they plant them, they interplant also certain trees which grow very tall and shade them, which they call *madres del cacao*.⁷

As Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 48) observed, the rich agricultural potential of Soconusco, especially for the production of cacao, must certainly have had an impact on the region in ancient times, even during the Late Preclassic florescence of Izapa.

Parsons (1967: 173) also commented on the historical importance of cacao as an item of exchange, which was easily traded from Soconusco to the east and west via continuous lowland trade routes that link the modern states of Veracruz and Tabasco to Chiapas, Guatemala, and El Salvador (fig. 2.1). As he described, the zone that connected the Atlantic and Pacific coasts consisted of areas of tropical rain forest as well as flat, open savannas that readily accommodated trade and migration. He suggested the name Peripheral Coastal Lowlands to describe this region, which represented “one single, integrated” area that had witnessed cultural diffusion from at least the Middle Preclassic period onward.

The concentrated production of cacao within Soconusco undoubtedly enabled the region to establish itself as an important commercial center. This is well documented during the period following the Conquest, when merchants would travel great distances to Soconusco to obtain the highly prized cacao in exchange for other goods (Gasco 1989, 1997, 2003). The Englishman Thomas Gage (1928: 151) made reference to this during his travels in 1648 through the Upper Grijalva River valley of Chiapas, an area well known for its textile production:

The chief commodity of this valley consisteth in cotton-wool, whereof are made such store of mantels for the Indians’ wearing that the merchants far and near come for them. They exchange them to Soconusco and Suchitepeques for cacao, whereby they are well stored of that drink.

Earlier, in 1594, Juan de Pineda had made similar observations regarding the networks of trade that stretched into the Soconusco region, particularly those involving the distribution of textiles by porters from the Upper Grijalva River valley into “the provinces of Soconusco and the coast of Zapotitlan and to Guatemala.”⁸ Scholes and Roys (1968: 38–39, 319) likewise discussed ethnohistoric evidence for pre-Hispanic and Colonial exchange networks, particularly of textiles, that extended from Chiapas to Yucatán and central Mexico (fig. 2.4). The same extensive trade routes also captured the attention of Fray Diego Durán (1971: 129) in the middle of the sixteenth century:

Today the natives of Cholula continue their trade and commerce with different merchandise, traveling through the most remote and distant parts of the land, such as Cuauhtemallan [Guatemala] and Xoconochco [Soconusco], all along those coasts and mines, with their loads of peddlers’ trinkets, just as they did in ancient times.

These diverse commercial routes most likely followed the same distribution channels as those for cacao, obsidian, and other goods both exotic and utilitarian, and were surely critical to forging Mixe-Zoque spheres of influence as far back as the Late Preclassic period (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 324).

IZAPA: LOCATION AND LINGUISTICS

Located within this matrix of communication and exchange was the site of Izapa, which is perched along the banks of the Río Izapa, a tributary of the larger Río Suchiate (fig. 2.1). The Río Suchiate, which divides the narrow Pacific coastal plain between modern Chiapas and Guatemala, originates on the slopes of the volcano Tacaná, whose profile dominates the horizon on a clear day (fig. 2.5). The Río Izapa forms the eastern boundary of Izapa’s ceremonial zone and is littered with large boulders that provided an abundant supply of ancient building stones (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez



Figure 2.4. Hypothetical scene of Aztec trader presenting cloak to lowland ruler. Painting by Rita Ford Guernsey after Stuart 1981: 114.

1982: 55). The site itself, only twenty-two miles from the Pacific Ocean, is characterized by a gentle gradient sloping toward the coastal plain, where ancient inhabitants were afforded access to a variety of goods, such as salt, aquatic foods, lowland fruits and vegetables, and palm leaves, that served both utilitarian and ceremonial functions (Borhegyi 1965: 6).

Perhaps even more significant was Izapa’s location at the nexus of two major cultural regions during the Late Preclassic period, with Mixe-Zoquean-speaking groups to the west and Mayan speakers to the east. In 1586 the Franciscan Commissary General, Fray Ponce, accompanied by his personal secretary, Antonio de Ciudad Real—an



Figure 2.5. Tacaná volcano as seen from Group F at Izapa. Photo by author.

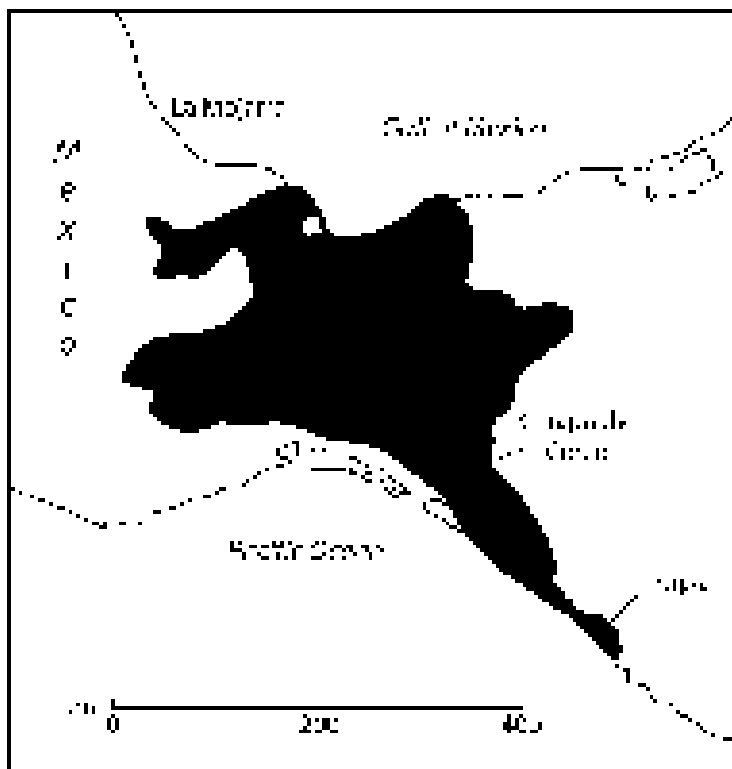


Figure 2.6. Map showing geographic distribution of Mixe-Zoquean languages. After Justeson and Kaufman 1993: Fig. 1.

accomplished linguist—traveled through the Soconusco region, moving in a southeasterly direction from the town of Tonalá to that of Ayutla, just south of Izapa on the Río Suchiate (Ciudad Real 1873; Roys 1932). According to Ponce (1948: 7), the towns were inhabited by individuals who spoke a language “much like Zoque.”⁹ In fact, by at least the Middle and Late Preclassic periods, the Mixe-Zoquean-speaking region of Mesoamerica (fig. 2.6) appears to have stretched through the greater Isthmus of Tehuantepec area, including the coastal regions and drainage basins of the Coatzacoalcos River in Veracruz; the Grijalva River, which runs through western Tabasco and the highlands of Chiapas; and the Tonalá River, which marks the boundary between the modern states of Veracruz and Tabasco. It also encompassed portions of southeastern Oaxaca and continued down the Pacific Coast of Chiapas into southwestern Guatemala (Coe 1961: 22; Foster 1969: 448, 453; Lowe 1977: 200–201).¹⁰

Importantly, the geographic distribution of Mixe-Zoquean languages closely corresponds to

the Olmec heartland region along the Gulf Coast in the modern states of Veracruz and Tabasco, as well as Olmec communication corridors that stretched through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and down into the Pacific coastal piedmont as far south as Izapa (Baez-Jorge 1973: 57–63; Hasler 1958: 46; Lowe 1977: 200; Vogt 1969: 27).¹¹ The Olmec (fig. 2.7), who rose to prominence during the Early and Middle Preclassic periods at sites such as San Lorenzo and La Venta, developed many templates—such as fundamental sculptural and architectural patterns for structuring sacred space and articulating a worldview—that would be invoked by later Mesoamericans for nearly three millennia until the arrival of the Spanish.¹² The correspondence between the location of Olmec sites and the distribution of Mixe-Zoquean languages, combined with a glottochronological time depth for Mixe-Zoquean languages that corresponds to the emergence of Olmec civilization circa 1500 BC, led Campbell and Kaufman (1976) to suggest that the Olmec were most likely speakers of Mixe-Zoquean languages (cf. Hasler 1958: 46). As they observed, many words in other Mesoamerican languages—in particular ones that are “diagnostic of the Mesoamerican culture area” such as cacao, tomato, bean, squash/gourd—are loans from Mixe-Zoquean.¹³ As Campbell and Kaufman (1976: 84) further noted, the far-reaching linguistic influence of the Mixe-Zoquean language attests to “the prestigious and powerful position speakers of Mixe-Zoquean languages must have had” during the Preclassic period.

By the Late Preclassic period, Izapa appears to have been located at the southeastern boundary of the Mixe-Zoquean language region. Early on, J. Eric S. Thompson (1943: 108, 1948: 10) discerned as much, based primarily on Ponce’s 1586 description of a Zoquean-like language spoken in the region, as well as modern documentation by Sapper (1927) of Tapachultec, a Mixean language, still spoken in the vicinity of Tapachula at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Coe (1961: 21) concurred, stating that the language of Soconusco was “certainly of the Mixe-Zoque group,” as did Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 10; cf. Lowe 1977: 243),

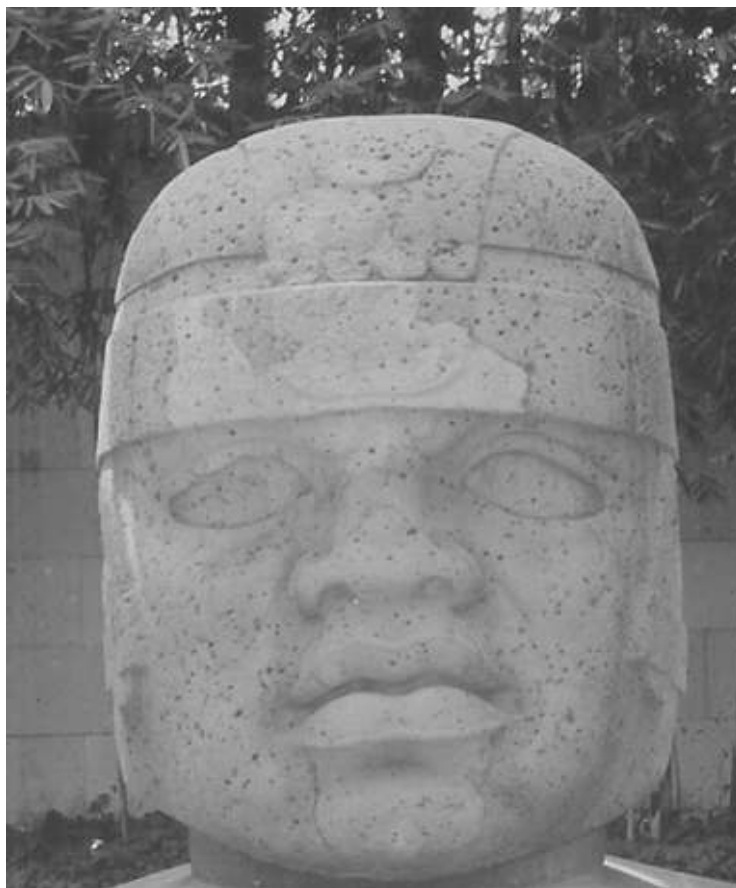


Figure 2.7. San Lorenzo Monument I. Photo by author.

who placed Izapa at the southeasternmost frontier of the Mixe-Zoquean language region.

Nonetheless, the almost complete lack of hieroglyphic inscriptions at Izapa makes an absolute linguistic affiliation for the inhabitants of Izapa difficult to establish. Only a handful of monuments at Izapa contain hieroglyphic elements, most of which appear to be predominantly calendrical in nature.¹⁵ While a significant amount of linguistic, ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and archaeological data provide compelling evidence that the site of Izapa was inhabited during the Late Preclassic period by speakers of a Mixe-Zoquean language, the possibility that its inhabitants as well as traders to the site may have spoken more than one language, including a Mayan one, cannot be ruled out.¹⁶ In fact, what is certain is that the people of Late Preclassic Izapa were participants in a dynamic system of trade and com-

1500	Pre-Olmec	Preclassic
1400		
1300	Olmec	Preclassic
1200		
1100	Pre-Olmec	Preclassic
1000		
900	Olmec	Preclassic
800		
700	Pre-Olmec	Preclassic
600		
500	Olmec	Preclassic
400		
300	Pre-Olmec	Preclassic
200		
100	Olmec	Preclassic
0		
100	Pre-Olmec	Preclassic
200		
300	Olmec	Preclassic
400		
500	Pre-Olmec	Preclassic
600		
700	Olmec	Preclassic
800		
900	Pre-Olmec	Preclassic
1000		
1100	Olmec	Preclassic
1200		
1300	Pre-Olmec	Preclassic
1400		
1500	Olmec	Preclassic

Figure 2.8. The archaeological sequence at Izapa. After Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: Fig. 7.1

munication that paid little heed to linguistic and ethnic boundaries.

EARLY AND MIDDLE PRECLASSIC IZAPA

The site of Izapa, which stretches across approximately four square kilometers on the western side of the Río Izapa, was first occupied during the Ocos cultural horizon (1500–1200 BC) (fig. 2.8).¹⁷ During this first phase of the Early Preclassic period (1500–900 BC), southern Chiapas and Guatemala were home to many groups of early

pottery-using people who took advantage of both coastal estuaries and the fertile inland piedmont, establishing fishing and agricultural villages.¹⁸ Already by this time, the site of Paso de la Amada in Chiapas, Mexico, displayed evidence for rank as evidenced by differentiation in burials and the presence of a large, well-built structure atop a mound that may have functioned as an elite domestic residence.¹⁹ In fact, Clark (1991) argued that the Pacific slope and coastal zones witnessed a precocious development during the first stages of the Preclassic period at a time when Olmec sites along the Gulf Coast were not yet established.²⁰

During the subsequent Cuadros phase (1200–1000 BC), settlements in the region continued to be concentrated along marine estuaries and the inland coastal plain. At Izapa, ceramics and figurines dating to this phase bear close affinities to those at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo, which flourished in southern Veracruz between the years 1200 and 900 BC (Coe and Diehl 1980; Cyphers Guillén 1996; Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 121). Such similarities suggest that, during this period, Izapa was participating in a widespread Early Olmec, or Mixe-Zoque, interaction sphere.²¹ Evidence for Izapa's participation within this Olmec horizon would continue into the following Jocotal phase (1000–850 BC), despite the collapse of San Lorenzo and the subsequent emergence of the site of La Venta, which would dominate the Olmec heartland throughout the Middle Preclassic period.²²

The Middle Preclassic period (900–300 BC) witnessed the beginning of monumental construction activity at Izapa (fig. 2.9). Ekholm (1969: 98) recognized early platform phases deep within Mound 30a at Izapa that date to the Duende phase (850–650 BC).²³ These more restricted Duende-period occupations, concentrated along the Group B terrace, gave way during the Escalon phase (650–450 BC) to a more widespread occupation that encompassed the entire central zone of the site (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 127–129). Regionally, during the Middle Preclassic, there was likewise a significant growth in the number of villages in the Pacific coastal zone as

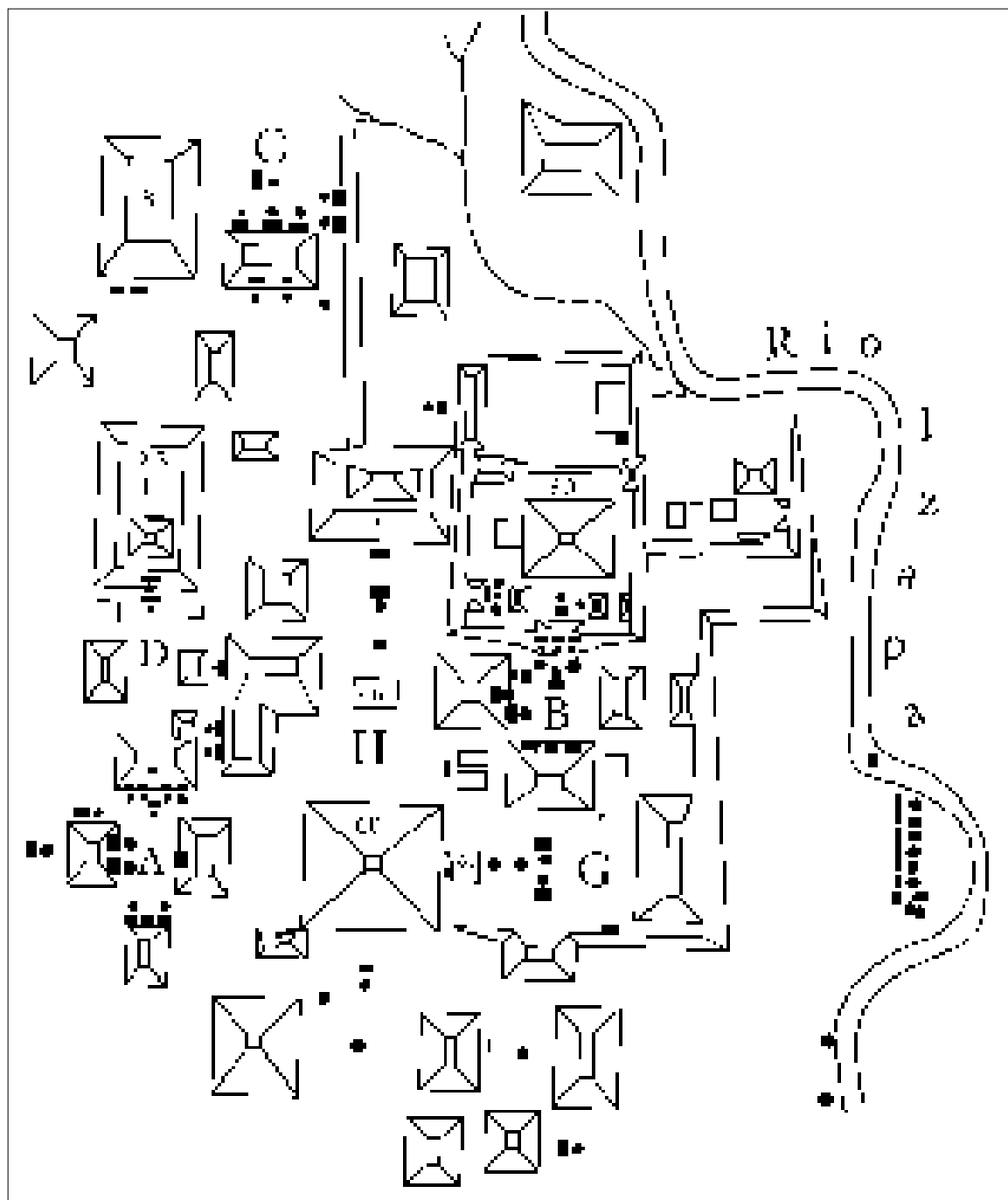


Figure 2.9. Map of central Izapa. After Ekholm 1969: Fig. 4.

well as the construction of public architecture in the form of large earthen mounds at the site of La Blanca, Guatemala (Coe and Flannery 1967: 85), which Love (1991, 1999a, 2002b) suggested became the major center in the region by the Conchas phase (900–600 BC). In fact, Love (1991: 57, 1999a: 137, 2002b: 44) posited that, during the

Middle Preclassic period, Izapa may have been a secondary center within the greater polity of La Blanca.²⁴

The ensuing Frontera phase (450–300 BC), which represented a transition from the Middle to Late Preclassic periods, was characterized by Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 12) as a “develop-



Figure 2.10. Mound 30 in Group B at Izapa. Photo by author.

mental continuum” that witnessed the rise of Izapa to a position of relative importance within the region; certainly the decline of the Pacific coastal site of La Blanca contributed to this. Population at Izapa continued to grow, as did the Mound 30a pyramid, which reached a height of sixteen meters at this time (fig. 2.10) (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 129). The supporting Mound 30 acropolis was also expanded during this period. It included the earliest-known jade offering at Izapa from Burial 30e-1, which consisted of cylindrical and spherical jade beads deposited at the waist of what may have been an individual whose remains were not preserved within the cut-stone grave (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 194).²⁵ More than a special burial treatment, this was most likely an act of elite conspicuous consumption, framed against the backdrop of ritual space at Izapa during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition.

LATE PRECLASSIC IZAPA: CONSTRUCTING SACRED SPACE

It was not until the Guillen phase (300–50 BC), however, that Izapa reached its apex of growth. This period was characterized by extraor-

dinary construction activity in which all of the central plaza groups reached their maximum proportions (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 133). While Izapa expanded significantly, sites in the coastal Ocos area experienced population declines and most settlements appear to have been concentrated in the piedmont zone (Coe and Flannery 1967: 89).²⁶ The neighboring site of El Jobó, located to the southeast of Izapa, also experienced growth and erected fifteen-meter-high pyramidal mounds, one of which was topped with a stela carved in a distinctly Izapan style. Regionally, the same attention to monumental construction characterized sites such as Takalik Abaj, El Baúl, Chalchuapa, Chocholá, Kaminaljuyu, and El Ujuxte during this Late Preclassic period.

Throughout Izapa’s history the organization of space at the site was typified by the quadrilateral arrangement of mounds around a central plaza, although several of the plaza groups departed from this model (fig. 2.9). Most Late Preclassic structures at Izapa were of earthen construction, finished with riverstones, clay facing, or occasionally lime plaster. Also by this period, the site center comprised seven distinct plaza and mound groupings, focused around the enormous Mound 60,

which reached a height of twenty-two meters at this time (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 133). The placement of Mound 60 at the center of Izapa marked the central axis of the site at twenty-one degrees east of north, providing a compelling visual orientation for the site itself. The highest pyramid at Izapa, Mound 60 defined the southern extent of the Group H plaza, which was bound on the north by Mound 25.²⁷ Even today, the rationale for the positioning of these structures is still abundantly clear: Mound 25 is perfectly framed by the contours of the Tacaná volcano looming on the horizon (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: fig. 4.5; Norman 1980). As Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 262) observed, the two tiers of Mound 25 mirror the contours of the volcano, thereby replicating on a smaller scale the natural topography of the region. At the center of the Group H plaza stood Mound 46, which may have served as a dance platform or stage for public display. Standing on this low mound, a ruler could have aligned himself with the central axis of the site and with

the massive Tacaná volcano to the north in a powerful demonstration of political authority and geomantic symmetry (Guernsey Kappelman 2001: 83–84).

When considered in light of broader patterns of Mesoamerican architecture and the construction of sacred space, the Group H plaza also served to define Izapa as the center of the world. At least since the time of the Middle Preclassic Olmec, Mesoamerican peoples erected large pyramidal structures that emerged from the plazas at their base. This architectural configuration symbolized a mountain of sustenance rising from the waters of creation, and functioned as the archetypal mythological landscape for many Mesoamerican groups.²⁸ This pattern is revealed at Izapa through the series of reservoirs, dams, and aqueducts that immediately surrounded Mound 60, and which channeled water from the central plazas to the Río Izapa, which formed the eastern boundary of the site (fig. 2.11) (Gómez Rueda 1995; Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 263). A



Figure 2.11. The Group H plaza at Izapa showing hydraulic systems. After Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: Fig. 8.8.

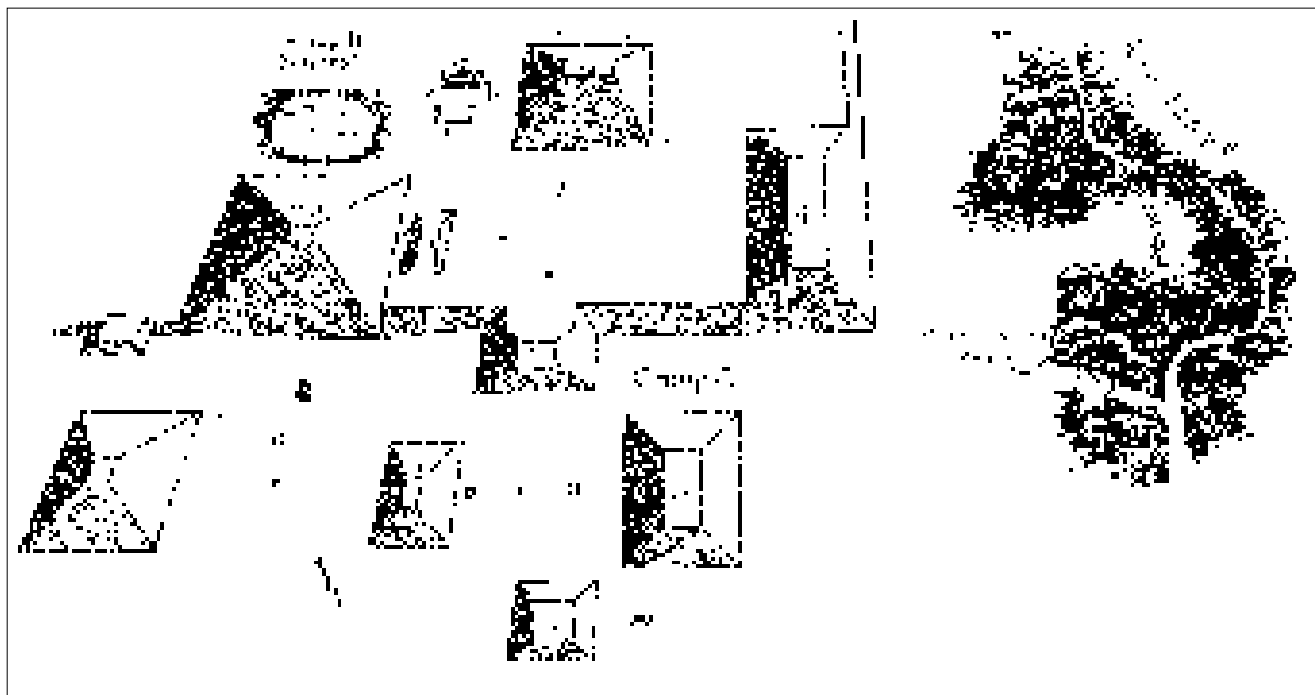


Figure 2.12. The eastern periphery of Izapa showing possible entrance to site from the bank of the Río Izapa. After Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: Fig. 14.1

reservoir was created to the north of Mound 60 when the pyramid was constructed during the Late Preclassic period and fill was removed from the adjacent plaza spaces. As Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 263) noted, this reservoir was aligned with Mounds 25, 60, and Tacaná in the distance, and complemented by the presence of another ancient reservoir, lined with stone boulders and a series of drains, to the west. This water catchment and drainage system may have created the effect of a great pool of water at the center of the site, from which arose massive Mound 60. As such, this reservoir would have represented the fertile waters of abundance, surrounding a pyramid that embodied Mesoamerican notions of sustenance and creation (Guernsey Kappelman 2001: 84). This paradigmatic structuring of sacred space at Late Preclassic Izapa—and elsewhere in Mesoamerica, for that matter—may thus have provided an arena in which messages of cultural identity and political legitimacy were articulated and performed according to carefully defined structuring principles (cf. Geertz 1980; Schapiro 1953; Wheatley 1971).²⁹

But how was one's entrance into this sacred center of the site directed? One possible point of entry to Izapa might have been along the banks of the Río Izapa, on the eastern periphery of the site (fig. 2.12). Just southeast of Group G, a terrace was constructed, presumably during the Guillen phase, along the river's western bank (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 257–259). A stone-paved ramp led down from this terrace to the riverbank where a carved stone basin, or fountain stone, was found in situ beneath a spring (Norman 1976: fig. 5.79).³⁰ Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 259) noted that the paved ramp provided convenient access to the river and spring-fed fountains, and also suggested that it served a ceremonial purpose. They proposed that the paved ramp might have accommodated ritual processions to the spring-fed water that was gathered in the stone basins, while also functioning as “a formal entranceway into Izapa for visiting delegations arriving from the east” (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 81). This proposed point of entry would have led directly to the ceremonial core of the site and formed a conceptual link between the sacred waters of Mound

60 and the Río Izapa itself. Immediately to the north of the paved ramp, as if marking the approach to the landing, a group of nineteen rough boulder stelae and accompanying altars were placed in a line at a bend of the river (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 257).

Testifying to the ancient significance of this ceremonial path of entry is Mound 61, a small structure that sat adjacent to Mound 60 on its eastern side and may have served an important function on ritual circuits to and from the site (fig. 2.12). Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 254) noted that Mound 61 was an unusually well constructed building with plaster floors and cut-stone walls that dated to the Late Preclassic Guillen phase. Such fine construction was anomalous at Izapa, where the vast majority of architecture was characterized by riverstone platforms (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 254). As visitors disembarked onto the paved ramp from the river and slowly ascended the raised plaza of Group G on their way to the heart of the site, they would have been greeted by this exceptional structure, framed as it were against the contours of Mound 60. Upon reaching the low platform of Mound 61, visitors might have been afforded a dramatic view of the symbolic waters of creation that flowed to the north of Mound 60. From this vantage point they would also have seen their first glimpse of the ceremonial landscape that unfolded before them.

Izapa's site center thus manifested a striking dialogue with the natural environment that included direct architectural references to the surrounding landscape. Elites at the site also clearly chose to adopt a pan-Mesoamerican formal vocabulary that shaped the site center into a familiar and effective setting for conveying messages of political and supernatural authority. The nature of this formal vocabulary—expressed on a large scale through architecture and the organization of space—can perhaps be considered as an aesthetic trope, or as the formal, physical manifestation of core cultural principles that provided an overarching structure in which socially effective communication could take place (Armstrong 1975; Reese-Taylor and Koontz 2001; Schapiro 1953).

Because the metaphors and tropes invoked by the elite at Izapa communicated deeply engrained cultural patterns, they would have been broadly recognizable to audiences of many ethnic affiliations in ancient Mesoamerica. In a profound sense, it was only through such grand architectural schemes and metaphorically constructed space that messages of power and authority could be successfully conveyed to the diverse audiences that interacted with the population at Late Preclassic Izapa.

The audiences to whom these messages were directed at Izapa, however, must be considered carefully. The authors of the messages recorded in monumental sculptural and architectural form were clearly the ruling elite of the site, and the ideas conveyed by them reinforced their claims to authority by linking them and their actions to mythic events and locations, topics dealt with more fully in Chapters 5 and 6. Yet it must not be assumed that all levels of society “bought into” or passively accepted the ruling elite's claims to political and cosmological authority. At Izapa, assessing the effect of these elite-driven statements on the local nonelite population is impossible to determine given the almost complete lack of data from residential sectors at the site. However, there are clues in the broader archaeological record of the Pacific slope that suggest that public ritual became more significant during the Late Preclassic period than it had been in the previous Middle Formative period. At Middle Formative La Blanca, for instance, ceramic figurines are omnipresent in domestic contexts, which suggests that individual household ritual—outside the supervision of the ruler—was of major importance during this time (Love 1999a, 2002a, 2002b; cf. Clark, Hansen, and Pérez 2000; Marcus 1996). By the advent of the Late Preclassic at nearby El Ujuxte, however, there was an almost complete cessation of household ritual as evidenced by a significant decrease in figurine use as well as a decline in household feasting (Love 2002a; Love, Castillo, and Balcárcel 1996: 8). While comparable evidence does not exist to test whether this was also the case at Izapa, evidence at other sites along the Pacific slope during the Late Preclassic period

does suggest that household ritual was deemphasized, while increasing emphasis was placed instead on public ritual space and its associated ceremonies (Guernsey and Love 2005). That said, however, it must be acknowledged that the evidence from Izapa is skewed. Monumental statements of elite authority cannot be tested against evidence from nonelite domestic contexts to determine whether the rituals that took place in households, if any, echoed those of the formal, public spaces or, as is also possible, challenged them. As is discussed in greater detail in later chapters, however, there is evidence to suggest that the monumental statements of authority at Izapa resonated with more than just local elites or those visiting from other regions. Many of the messages and themes recorded on the monuments in the site center reflect themes with ties to fundamental agricultural cycles, astronomical events, or mythologies that appear to have been broadly shared at this time and grounded in the rhythms of daily life. In other words, monuments with such narratives at Izapa were probably, at some level, effective at communicating an elite ideology to a nonelite population.

THE STELA PHENOMENON: ANTECEDENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

According to Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 23, 133), the majority of monuments at Izapa were carved during the Guillen phase (300–50 BC), with the latest possible dating for others in the subsequent Terminal Preclassic Hato phase (50 BC–AD 100). Moreover, as Norman (1976: 324) noted, when the monuments at Izapa are grouped together they demonstrate little stylistic evolution, but rather appear to have been conceived as a unit. The archaeology supports this assessment, as the majority of monuments from the site center, excluding Group F, were found in situ, organized amongst the distinct plaza groups at approximately the same stratigraphic level (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 159).³¹

The plazas of Groups A and B, located to the west and northeast of Mound 60, respectively, held

the highest concentration of carved monuments at Izapa and appear to have been the loci of ritual activity during the Late Preclassic florescence of the site. As Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 159) described for Group A (see fig. 1.4), the monuments “must have been in contemporaneous use or veneration as presently arranged” and represent “a long progression of Guillen-phase sculptural and construction activity.”³² Within these plaza groupings, many of the monuments were organized into stela-altar pairs, as Stirling (1943: 61) first observed during his early visit to the site. At Izapa, these stela-altar pairs literally punctuate the plaza space with their imagery and messages, and indicate the conceptualization of a unified program of sculpture and architecture that demarcated sacred space. As will be explored throughout this study, the sculpture functioned, quite literally, as a communicative medium used to transmit potent symbolic and political messages to audiences during the Late Preclassic period.

The frequency with which this stela-altar combination was employed at Izapa attests to its role as the primary sculptural vehicle at the site. In fact, Izapa has been credited with the origin of the stela-altar “cult,” a term traditionally found in the literature that refers to the convention of pairing a plain or carved stela with a low, sometimes carved, altar.³³ By briefly tracing the developmental trajectory of the stela form through the remainder of this chapter, insight into the function and conceptual significance of this unique sculptural mode can be discerned.

The stela form appears to have emerged as a sculptural format during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition. Scholars attributed the earliest Mesoamerican stelae to the Middle Preclassic Olmec site of La Venta, citing their appearance there as a “radical innovation” in the mode of sculpture during this period.³⁴ Despite the novelty of the stela form, a range of sculptural prototypes existed that may have influenced its development. For example, the fully three-dimensional monumental heads at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo, which date to the Early Preclassic period, are flattened on the back (fig. 2.13). While this informa-



Figure 2.13. Profile view of San Lorenzo Monument 1. Drawing by Felipe Dávalos, from Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 423. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.

tion alone seems relatively trivial, Clancy (1990) astutely observed that it indicates a directional orientation for the sculptures and an awareness of recto-verso fields. This is especially significant as the tradition of monumental heads and other three-dimensional formats were maintained along with the development of the stela form, demonstrating that a dialogue between two- and three-dimensional forms characterized the evolution of art throughout the Preclassic period. Examples of this exchange are found on San Lorenzo Monument 14 and La Venta Altar 4 (fig. 2.14), each of which incorporated a highly three-dimensional frontal scene with low-relief carving along its front and sides. This kind of low-relief carving accommodated more-complex narrative compositions, and may also have served as a model for the nascent stela tradition.



Figure 2.14. La Venta Altar 4. Photo by F. Kent Reilly III.



Figure 2.15. San Lorenzo Monument 42. Drawing by Felipe Dávalos, from Coe and Diehl 1980: Fig. 479. Courtesy of the University of Texas Press.

Another possible antecedent to the stela form appears at San Lorenzo. Reilly (1999, 2002: 44) suggested that Monuments 41 and 42, originally identified as columns by Coe and Diehl (1980: 350–353), may be early stelae (fig. 2.15). Coe and Diehl (1980: 351) recorded that one of these



Figure 2.16. Chalcatzingo Monument I. Photo by Linda Schele.



Figure 2.17. Oxtotitlan Mural I. Photo by F. Kent Reilly III.

pieces, Monument 42, was deeply buried in a stratum dated to circa 1050 BC, during the Early Preclassic period, making it the oldest monument at the site.

Other potential prototypes for the stela form also exist, such as petroglyphs and paintings on natural rock formations such as Chalcatzingo Monument 1 (fig. 2.16) and Oxtotitlan Mural 1 (fig. 2.17). Their smoothed stone surfaces foreshadow the more highly prepared faces of stela

(Clancy 1990: 22), while their iconography is often quite consistent with that of other monumental sculpture and later stelae. These Middle Preclassic petroglyphs and rock paintings were not without narrative structure, however. For example, Angulo (1987: 133) and Reilly (1994: 102–116) suggested that a series of petroglyphs at Chalcatzingo composed a narrative sequence of events that unfolded across the wide, horizontal rock surface.³⁵ However, despite this conceptual organization at Chalcatzingo, the natural form of the rocks remained dominant: their bulky contours clearly dictated the placement of the imagery. This is in direct contrast to the more evolved stela form, where the stone surface was secondary to imagery arranged within well-defined compositional fields (cf. Clancy 1990).

Boulder monuments such as La Venta Stela 2 (fig. 2.18) are also logical predecessors.³⁶ Stela 2 combines high relief for the central figure that projects out from the surface of the rock and low relief for the adjacent secondary figures. Yet in contrast to stelae, as Clancy (1990: 24) observed, “the images flow over the undressed stone surface with seemingly little regard for creating or respecting the boundary or limits of the field.” Despite this free-form sensibility, La Venta Stela 2 may represent an early example of what Clancy (1990: 27) termed the “paneled field” (fig. 2.19), which articulates the boundary of the imagery and “presents all the visual information on one plane in an upright, visibly accessible manner,” a trait that also characterizes the stela form. Further, in contrast to petroglyphs or rock paintings, boulder monuments were deliberately moved and incorporated into ceremonial centers, where they helped to define sacred space.

Middle Preclassic Pijijiapan Stone 1, from the site of Pijijiapan along the Pacific Coast of modern Chiapas, Mexico, is a massive boulder monument whose contours bear striking resemblance to the later stela form.³⁷ Unlike La Venta Stela 2, all of the figures are carved in low relief with incised details. However, like La Venta Stela 2, there is marked attention to a defined pictorial field, emphasized by an upper framing band that, in a

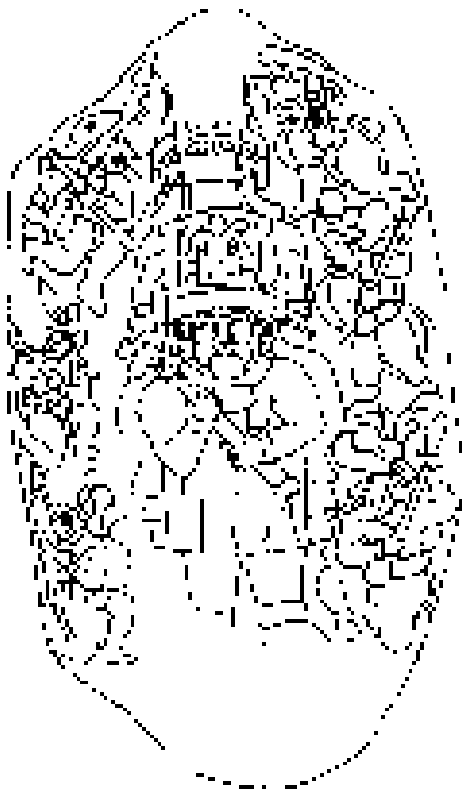


Figure 2.18. La Venta Stela 2. Drawing by Jack Jackson after photo by F. Kent Reilly III.



Figure 2.19. Example of a "paneled field" composition. Drawing by Flora Clancy.

new drawing of the monument, appears to continue down the right side of the scene (fig. 2.20). Despite the suggestion of a "paneled field," the composition spreads laterally across the surface of the stone, flowing around to its sides and thereby taking advantage of the surfaces of the stone that were smoothest.

Another example of an intermediary boulder monument is Tres Zapotes Stela D, which dates to the Middle to Late Preclassic transition (fig. 2.21) (Stirling 1943: plate 14a). A group of three figures appears within a recessed niche carved in the form of a feline maw. The proscenium-like space created by this maw recalls La Venta Altar 4 (fig. 2.14), in which the central niche was also portrayed as a gaping jaguar's mouth.

Standing in contrast to Tres Zapotes Stela D, which retains the natural contours of the boulder itself, is La Venta Stela 1, which gives primacy to the paneled field and dramatically alters and refines the natural shape of the rock itself (fig.



Figure 2.20. Pijijiapan Stone 1. Drawing by Ajax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.



Figure 2.21. Tres Zapotes Stela D. Photo by Richard Stewart from Stirling 1943: Plate 14a. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

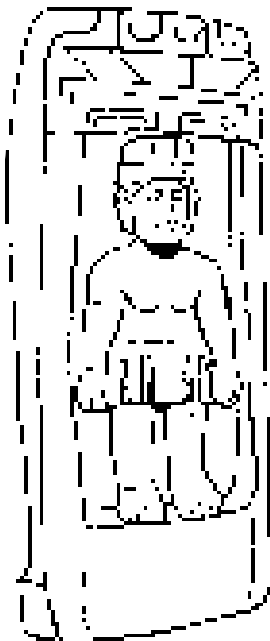


Figure 2.22. La Venta Stela 1. Drawing by author.

2.22). Despite the emphasis of La Venta Stela 1 on the paneled field, the iconography of its top framing band compares closely to the motifs at the top of La Venta Altar 4 (fig. 2.14). Such examples testify to the visual and symbolic interplay that characterized the development of the stela form during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition.

Naturally occurring columnar-jointed basalt, quarried in prismatic shapes with four or more sides, provides another possible antecedent for the stela form. As Clancy (1990: 22) described, examples such as Kaminaljuyu Stela 9 from the Guatemalan Highlands (fig. 2.23)³⁸ and the Alvarado Stela from Veracruz (Cervantes 1976; Parsons 1986: 17) are carved from basalt columns whose



Figure 2.23. Kaminaljuyu Stela 9. Photo by Michael Love.

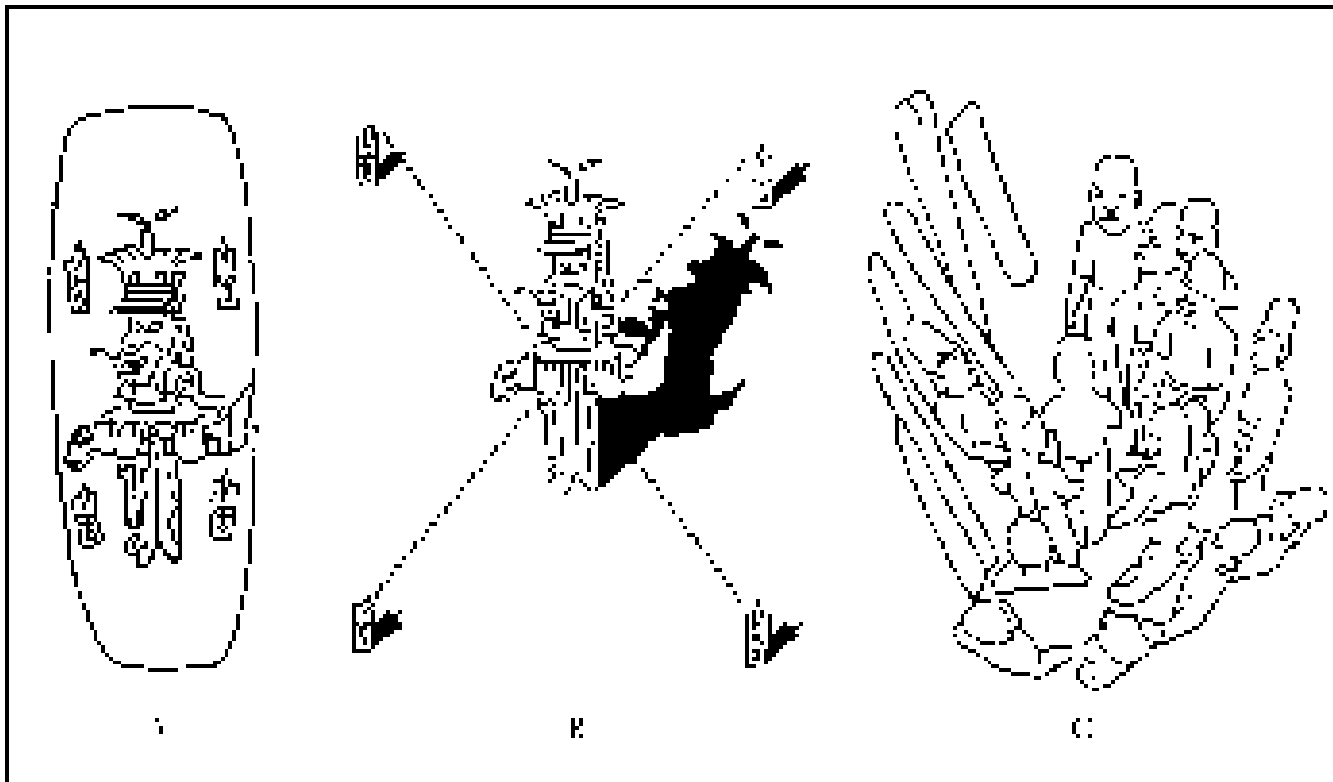


Figure 2.24. Olmec celt imagery and themes of centrality; A, Celt from Río Pesquero (drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.); B, Three-dimensional rendering of Río Pesquero celt imagery (drawing by F. Kent Reilly III); C, La Venta Offering 4 (drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.).

smooth surfaces required little or no preparation and whose regular, vertical contours did not necessitate additional shaping. These columns were innovative for their development of the wrap-around field, which accommodated more-narrative compositions by continuing the imagery onto the sides of the monument without interruption (Clancy 1990: 25). Uncarved basalt columns are also well known from the Central Highlands of Guatemala during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods. In fact, of the thirty-eight Preclassic sites documented by Shook in the Central Highlands, thirteen exhibited uncarved basalt columns, typically placed in plazas or in front of low platform mounds and often oriented in rows running north to south (Borhegyi 1965: 13; Parsons 1986: 16; Shook 1952, 1971; Villacorta and Villacorta 1927: 62–63; Williamson 1877).

Although by no means monumental, celts also very likely provided a formal and ideological pro-

tototype for the stela form (fig. 2.24A) (Clancy 1990: 28; Porter 1992, 1996). During the Middle Preclassic period, celts—or small, oblong, typically greenstone objects—became the primary portable object for the dissemination of a Middle Preclassic Olmec symbol system (Grove and Gillespie 1992; Reilly 1994). As if in response to the vertical shape of the object, much of celt imagery focuses on the theme of centrality and repeats a symbolic repertoire that referenced the role of a Middle Preclassic ruler as the *axis mundi*, or symbolic conduit that connected the realms of the universe (fig. 2.24B) (Reilly 1994). While the nearly identical shape of celts and stelae is enough alone to warrant comparison, the in situ assemblage of celts in La Venta Offering 4 demonstrates that celts—one of which was incised with designs—actually functioned as miniature stelae, defining an environment in which a series of individuals interact (fig. 2.24C) (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959:



A



B

Figure 2.25. Stela-altar pairs: A, Tzutzuculi Monuments 3 and 4 in situ (photo by Andrew McDonald); B, Ujuxte, Santa Rosa, Stela 7 and Altar 2. Photo by Francisco Estrada Belli).

152–161; Reilly 1994: 121).³⁹ Moreover, as if to confirm the conceptual overlap between the two forms, several stelae at La Venta were carved of green-hued stones whose coloration echoed that of celts (Porter 1996: 67).

The site of Tzutzuculi, located just to the southeast of the modern town of Tonalá in Chiapas, contains several monuments that figure prominently in the development of the stela form along the Pacific slope during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition. Monuments 3 and 4 were found together to the west of Mound 4 at the site, in association with a horizontal stone identified as an altar by McDonald (fig. 2.25A) (1983: 39, figs. 32 and 33).⁴⁰ The contours of both monuments, which are approximately 1.35 m tall, exhibit more regularized and elongated “stelalike” contours than contemporaneous boulder monuments such as Pijijiapan Stone 1. The visual emphasis on the frontal plane of the monuments also adheres to Clancy’s (1990) concept of the paneled field, and foreshadows later stela compositions. Of special note at Tzutzuculi is the relationship between this nascent stela form and earlier Middle Preclassic (650–450 BC) monuments at the site that were placed on either side of the stone stairway on Mound 4 (McDonald 1983: 37–39, figs. 29–31). Although these earlier sculptures, Monuments 1 and 2, appear to have been conceived in conjunction with their architectural

backdrop and bear more boulderlike, square contours, they exhibit the same incised designs that characterize Monuments 3 and 4. Most important to this discussion, however, is the transition from architectural sculpture to free-standing monuments, which appears to have been a deliberate aesthetic choice at the site during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition.

Other regions of Mesoamerica likewise participated in the development of this stela form. For example, carved stelae appear in the Northern Highlands of Guatemala by circa 400 BC at the site of El Portón (fig. 1.6A) (Sharer and Sedat 1987: plate 18.1).⁴¹ Stelae, although plain and uncarved, also existed at the Chiapas sites of Los Toros and Mazatán by circa 600 BC (Demarest 1976) and at Tonalá, where several of the stelae were found in association with altars (Fernández 1953: 81–100). Farther east along the Guatemalan Pacific slope, sites such as Monte Alto, Reynosa, and Pilar erected plain stelae during the same Middle to Late Preclassic transition (Bove 1989: 97; Parsons 1986: 41; Shook 1971); this same practice is attested at several sites in the Coatepeque region of Guatemala as well (Michael Love, personal communication 2003). Many of these plain stelae along the Guatemalan slope were aligned with the cardinal directions and erected in rows at various sites, paralleling patterns seen at contemporary

Central Highland sites (Bove n.d.a; Popenoe de Hatch 2002; Shook 1971). Such evidence indicates that, from its beginnings, the stela—whether carved or plain—was conceived in conjunction with the architectural and natural environment, where it was used to delineate sacred space. The distinctly human-modified shape of the stela in and of itself, as opposed to naturally formed boulder monuments, must also have carried powerful associations (Clancy 1990: 27).⁴²

The popularity of the stela form during this early period is further confirmed by recent excavations at the site of Urías in the Valley of Panchoy, Sacatépequez, Guatemala, where a small uncarved stela and accompanying ceramic cache were found in a Middle Preclassic context (Robinson n.d.; Robinson et al. 1999). While this evidence alone indicates the ritual contextualization of stelae in this region at a very early date, antecedents for this behavior have also been identified. An even earlier Middle Preclassic stepped platform lay below, with associated ceramic midden materials radiocarbon-dated as early as 900 BC (Robinson et al. 2000). This earlier earthen platform with a simple interior cache was topped by a plain stone boulder. As Robinson (n.d.) observed, such findings clearly indicate that uncarved boulders and stelae, in rudimentary forms, were used to mark ritual spaces in the Guatemalan Highlands already at the beginning of the Middle Preclassic period.

Recent excavations by Estrada Belli (1998, 2002; Estrada Belli, Kosakowsky, and Wolf 1998) at the site of Ujuxte in the Santa Rosa district of southeastern Guatemala confirm the continued significance of both carved and plain stelae during the Late Preclassic period. Six stelae, only one of which was carved, were found in situ in association with five altars at the site (fig. 2.25B). Three of the stela-altar combinations, as Estrada Belli (2002: 111) described, faced “the point of sunrise on the horizon during the equinox,” confirming the role of plain stelae as astronomically charged markers of sacred space.

At Izapa the stela format made its first appearance during the same Middle to Late Preclassic



Figure 2.26. Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2. Photo by Richard Stewart from Stirling 1943: Plate 53b. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

transition, perhaps enabled by the abundance of natural volcanic boulders in the piedmont zone of southern Chiapas.⁴³ Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2 (fig. 2.26) may represent an evolving stela form that developed out of the niche figure tradition that characterized monuments such as San Lorenzo Monument 14, Tres Zapotes Stela D (fig. 2.21), La Venta Stela 1 (fig. 2.22), and La Venta Altar 4 (fig. 2.14).⁴⁴ Based on this evidence, numerous scholars suggested that it represented one of the earliest sculptures at Izapa. For example, Ekholm (1969: 100) argued that it dated to the late Middle Preclassic period, circa 600–500 BC, while Parsons (1986: 19) placed it between 700 and 500 BC.⁴⁵ However, based on Miscellaneous Monument 2’s context at the foot of small Mound 30i in Group B (fig. 2.27), Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 196–199) suggested that it most likely dated to the Middle to Late Preclassic transition:

A predominance of even earlier sherds in

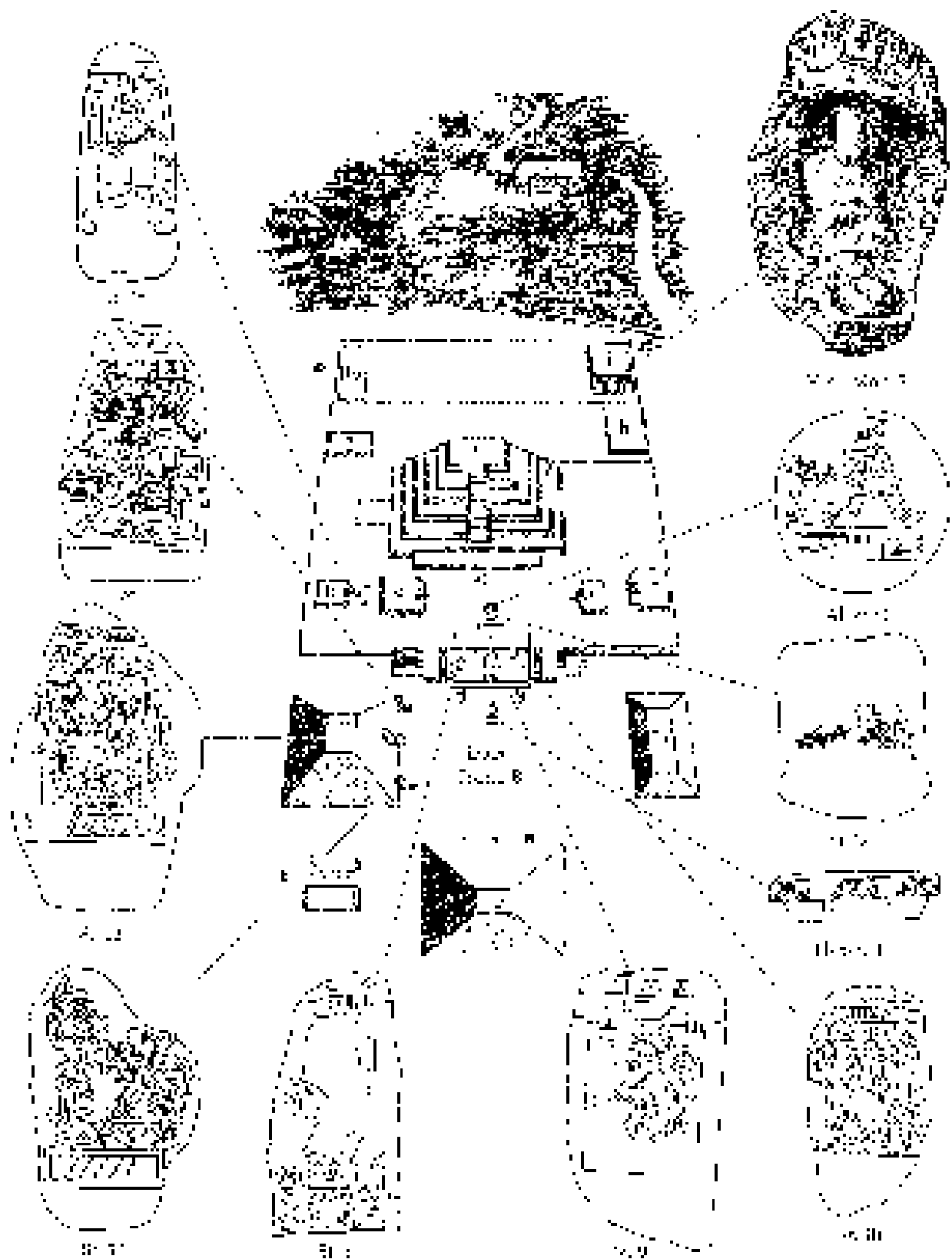


Figure 2.27. Schematic rendering of Group B at Izapa, showing location of major monuments. After Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: Fig. 9.1.

its shallow supporting fill may be used to support an argument for the relative earliness of this monument, and it may indeed be *the earliest*, and, in fact, a prototype relating the very old sculptural traditions of the Gulf Coast to the relatively late development at Izapa. . . .

We may propose, in light of the preceding, a maximum Frontera-phase date between 500 and 250 BC for the carving of Miscellaneous Monument 2. The platform behind it now, however, is certainly a Guillen-phase structure.

By comparison, other sculptures at Izapa such as Stela 1 (fig. 2.28) are much less three-dimensionally rendered and depart from the niche-figure tradition of Miscellaneous Monument 2. Nonetheless, Stela 1 retains the irregular contours of the original stone, as do other stelae at the site. Stela 1 also pays greater heed to Clancy's (1990) notion of a paneled field, as the bulk of its imagery is limited to the frontal plane, with only a few details curving onto the sides of the monument. This is in contrast to Miscellaneous Monument 2, whose carving encompasses its gradually curving top and sides.

However, what develops most fully at Izapa is the framing device, generally in the form of terrestrial, aquatic, or celestial bands, which delimit the narrative imagery of the stelae as on Izapa Stela 1 (fig. 2.28) (cf. Miles 1965; Quirarte 1976). These framing bands literally define the boundaries of the paneled field in which narrative scenes are presented, and represent a unique Late Preclassic solution to applying the narrative, multfigured imagery of Middle Preclassic boulder monuments to the more readily transportable stela monument with its emphasis on legibility and visually accessible imagery (Clancy 1990: 27).⁴⁶ Importantly, these framing bands occur with frequency on Late Preclassic stelae throughout the Izapan style communication sphere, from Takalik Abaj, Guatemala, to La Mojarra, Veracruz. On a very basic level, these bands denoted where the imagery began and where it ended. On a more esoteric level, they differentiated between simple rock sur-



Figure 2.28. Izapa Stela 1. Photo by Richard Stewart from Stirling 1943: Plate 49a. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

face and sacred space, and framed an inviolable location that was defined as separate from the viewer's space.⁴⁷ As Eliade (1959: 12) declared:

A sacred stone remains a stone; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality.

During the Late Preclassic period, these framing bands almost certainly facilitated the revelation of the stela form, and its imagery, as sacred. Furthermore, as Clancy (1990) observed, the framed fields created on the stelae were ideally

suited to the presentation and visual accessibility of complex narrative imagery on a single plane. The stelae were thus a potent medium through which elaborate ideological messages could be aired, quite literally, within the open plazas of Late Preclassic sites.

It should also be noted that the increasingly complex and narrative aspects of Late Preclassic stela imagery are quite “painterly” in nature, and undoubtedly owe a debt to more ephemeral mural painting traditions that did not withstand the ravages of time. Particularly at Izapa and other sites with Izapan style monuments, the fluidity of the carving and sinuous sensibility of the line bespeak a convention of representation grounded in painting traditions. The best evidence for this comes from the recently discovered murals at San Bartolo, in the Maya Lowlands, which demonstrate the existence of highly sophisticated painting traditions already well in place by the Preclassic period (Saturno n.d.; Saturno et al. 2001; Saturno, Taube, and Stuart 2005). Any discussion of the development of the stela form, then, must acknowledge that the smoothed surfaces of stelae—clearly designed to accommodate more complex imagery—were probably born from a union of long-established sculptural and painterly traditions.

While the formal advances that the stela format accommodated are critical to a discussion of the evolution of this form, it must be borne in mind that the majority of stelae at Izapa are uncarved. In fact, almost 60 percent of the known stelae from the site are plain (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 89–92; Norman 1976: 4). As Parsons (1986: 64) noted in his survey of Preclassic-period sculpture from southern Mesoamerica, “every Late Preclassic site with any stone monuments at all, from Tonalá to Chalchuapa, is known to have a significant proportion of plain stelae” within its sculptural corpus. This tendency to erect uncarved stelae was well established already during the Middle Preclassic period at sites scattered throughout the Guatemalan Highlands and Pacific slope region, as already discussed, and persisted well into the Classic Maya period at various lowland sites, where carved and uncarved stelae were erected in site centers side by side.

Whether the surfaces of these plain stelae were painted remains a point of conjecture; the surfaces of most are far too deteriorated to make such a determination. However, one intriguing bit of evidence from Kaminaljuyu suggests that the surfaces of plain stelae may have been prepared for painting. In Tomb 1 of the Lower Plaza of the Palangana, a rectangular slab with one side coated with white stucco and the other sides stained in red ochre, was excavated (Cheek 1977: 174).⁴⁸ Parsons (1986: 63) observed that this information provides tantalizing evidence that plain stelae from the Preclassic period may, indeed, have been painted, or stuccoed, at some time in the distant past.⁴⁹ Supporting evidence is found also on uncarved Stela 30 at Izapa, which was aligned with two other plain stelae in front of Mound 50 in Group B, in a formation that parallels that of the carved stelae at the site. The wide horizontal section that was removed from the base of Stela 30 served to dramatically foreground the remaining rectangular panel above. Norman (1976: 161) noted that the prepared surface of the raised rectangular panel was likely designed to accommodate decoration of some kind. This same attention to creating pictorial fields on plain stelae is also exhibited on Izapa Stela 34, whose surface was recessed around a raised, rectangular panel at the center (see Norman 1976: fig. 3.50).

At any rate, the placement of stelae in ceremonial centers evidences, as Reilly (1994) noted for the Middle Preclassic, the adoption and manipulation of the stela format by the elite. As he observed, carved (or stuccoed or painted) stelae would have provided an effective and essential tool for creating permanent records of rulers’ ritual performances as well as the political and cosmological ideologies that underpinned their authority. Moreover, as its florescence throughout southeastern Mesoamerica during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods suggests, the stela format may have arisen at least in part as the propagandistic tool and response of elites at various political centers to the external pressures and culturally diverse communication and trade networks that were in place across Mesoamerica by at least 600 BC. The predominance of low-relief carved Izapan style

stelae at Izapa, Takalik Abaj, El Baúl, and Kaminaljuyu, for instance, can thus be understood as symptomatic of the amalgamation and centralization of power at selected Late Preclassic sites (Parsons 1988: 7). The relationship between stelae and assertions of power may also be reflected in the Guatemalan Highland and Pacific coastal regions, where the tradition of erecting uncarved stelae emerged during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition. The sites where these plain stelae were erected appear to have been regional centers rather than secondary or subsidiary sites (Fred Bove, personal communication 2001).

Many of the stelae at Izapa feature the performances of Late Preclassic rulers or deities, or present narratives that provide a mythic context for these rituals, a topic that is the focus of Chapter 5. As such, these stone monuments functioned as the means through which the events of creation, and the ruler's role within them, were visualized and made tangible to audiences in a permanent form. However, the stelae did not only stand in mute testimony to bygone performances or stale political statements: their imagery was constantly revitalized through ritual performance by the ruler. As Stuart (1996) astutely observed, stelae were not just a medium through which royal deeds were commemorated, but actually played direct and active roles in the ritual life of the community. In a sense, stelae were more than permanent and

tangible records of ceremonial activity; they were surrogate ritual performers, analogous in their upright form to the ruler or the deity manifested. The very "human-ness" of the stela form may, in fact, lie at the heart of its success, which rested on its ability to communicate effectively with the human audiences gathered in its midst.⁵⁰

When considering Late Preclassic sculptural assemblages, it is important to acknowledge the stela's role as a vehicle that disseminated potent messages concerning the foundations of rulership and its relationship to broader themes of religion and cosmology. It is also critical to recognize that this format was adopted at site centers throughout an extensive geographic region during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods. Moreover, stelae embodied the very essence of Late Preclassic ritual: in their upright state, stelae were analogous to the performers, engaged in dances and rituals of supernatural communication. In other words, any discussion of Late Preclassic sculpture and its relationship to the sacred environment or role in articulating cosmological and political themes must go beyond a mere iconographic analysis of the imagery. It must consider all the actors within this dynamic environment, including the sculptural vehicles themselves, their architectonic environments, and the human beings engaged in performances within their midst.

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A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF IZAPA AND THE IZAPAN STYLE

And certainly Late Formative/Protoclassic Izapa no longer has to be seen as the lucky relay of the Olmec torch; rather, Izapa represents the culmination of a local and uninterrupted sequence of Pacific coast cultures stretching back to a time when the Olmec sites were not even occupied.

—*Marcus 1989*

INTRODUCTION

The story of the discovery and documentation of the site of Izapa has been described in great detail by Norman (1976) and Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982), yet deserves at least some retelling in order to place the present study within a historical framework. This chapter traces the gradual unfolding of the story of Izapa and, in particular, its monuments, as they came to the attention of scholars eager to fit them into fluid chronological frameworks and stylistic groupings. Perhaps even more tellingly, the gradual acknowledgment of Izapa's unique geographic and temporal role paralleled greater advancements in the field of Mesoamerican studies in general. In fact, Izapa's role in the historical development of the field of Precolumbian art history reveals the ways in which scholars grappled with an ever-evolving landscape of new monuments, new sites, and continually contested dates.

Complicating the situation for Izapa was its location, which literally straddled major ethnic regions, and its monuments, which in terms of style bore striking relationships to both east and west, Olmec and Maya, and earlier and later cultures. The struggle to define the parameters of the Izapan style dominated discussions for many

decades, and sheds light on how modern canons of art are developed, characterized, problematized, and politicized. Rather than critiquing the canon of Mesoamerican art as a whole, however—an obviously impossible task—this chapter focuses on the Izapan style phenomenon as one important thread that literally weaves together a critical segment of southeastern Mesoamerican art history. While this discussion inevitably demonstrates the inherent difficulties and fluidity of analytic categories such as “style,” it also demonstrates the potential that art historical analysis holds for revealing paths of communication and spheres of interaction, otherwise muddled by incomplete or conflicting archaeological, linguistic, and ethno-historic records. By beginning at the moment when Izapa dramatically burst onto the scene of modern Precolumbian scholarship in the 1930s and following its historiographical trajectory through the present day, this study reveals Izapa's pivotal role in the development of an art historical chronology for Mesoamerica alongside the major issues that characterized Precolumbian art history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Before beginning, however, it is necessary to define the slippery term “style,” which has been inserted into historical discussions of Izapa and Izapan style monuments since J. Eric S. Thomp-

son's first use of the phrase "Izapa style" in 1943. According to Meyer Schapiro, who attempted to define the problematic concept within the field of art history, style refers to the constant forms, elements, qualities, and expressions in art, whether of an individual, a group, or a society:

To the historian of art, style is an essential object of investigation. He studies its inner correspondences, its life-history, and the problems of its formation and change. He, too, uses style as a criterion of the date and place of origin of works, and as a means of tracing relationships between schools of art. But the style is, above all, a system of forms with a quality and a meaningful expression through which the personality of the artist and the broad outlook of a group are visible. It is also a vehicle of expression within the group, communicating and fixing certain values of religious, social, and moral life through the emotional suggestiveness of forms. It is, besides, a common ground against which innovations and the individuality of particular works may be measured. By considering the succession of works in time and space and by matching the variations of style with historical events and with the varying features of other fields of culture, the historian of art attempts, with the help of common-sense psychology and social theory, to account for the changes of style or specific traits. The historical study of individual and group styles also discloses typical stages and processes in the development of forms. (Schapiro 1953: 287)

Schapiro's definition is critical for understanding the potential that style, as a category of investigation, provides to scholars of Izapan style art, who contend with a multitude of monuments from numerous sites, interspersed across a broad geographic region, for which exact dating is challenging at best. It further provides a generous framework in which a definition of the Izapan style can be posited that not only accommodates a certain amount of variation but also tracks it as a

tool for discerning meaning, difference, or the impact of historical events. Most importantly, it views style as a "vehicle of expression within the group," through which paths of communication can be discerned.

Despite Schapiro's eloquent exposition on the meaning and utility of style as an analytic tool, many discussions of Izapan style monuments have confused issues of style with those of iconography. Iconography, as opposed to style, addresses the subject matter of a work while paying particular attention to the appearance and context of specific symbolic components. Moreover, the paths that these two discrete analytic categories follow often diverge. For example, the stylistic variations that characterize Izapan style monuments from different sites were often incorporated into iconographic schemes that bear remarkable consistency through time and across space. In other cases, the iconography of Izapan style monuments from particular sites demonstrates great ingenuity, yet is woven into compositions that adhere to a very conservative and broadly shared formal vocabulary. In other words, the two analytic categories track fundamentally different things yet, with regards to Late Preclassic Izapan style art, must be considered in conjunction with each other, as each illuminates different ways in which concepts and ideas were being exchanged during this critical period in Mesoamerican history.

THE 1930s AND 1940s

As described in the annotated "Izapa Bibliography: 1935–1980," compiled by Thomas A. Lee Jr. and published as an appendix to Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 329–337), Izapa first came to the attention of Mexican authorities in 1935. In that year, a Protestant minister by the name of José Coffin sent a letter (1935) and pictures of several monuments at Izapa to the famous Mexican archaeologist Ignacio Marquina, who was then director of Monumentos Prehispánicos in Mexico. In response to this letter, Marquina (1939: 40) included a brief description of Izapa in his *Atlas Arqueológico de la República Mexicana*, noting the

presence of isolated sculpture, mounds, burials, and ceramics at the site.

Also in 1939, a professor in Huixtla, Chiapas, by the name of Carlos Culebro published a report that described several of the monuments at Izapa in addition to listing other known archaeological sites in Chiapas (Culebro 1939). Culebro's survey closely coincided with other brief visits to the site by Karl Ruppert of the Carnegie Institution in 1938 and Alfred V. Kidder in 1939 (Stirling 1943: 61). Despite these early descriptions, however, no archaeological investigation of Izapa was begun until the site was brought to the attention of Matthew Stirling, director of the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution, by the renowned Mexican scholar and artist Miguel Covarrubias. Covarrubias and his wife, Rose, visited Stirling at the site of Cerro de las Mesas in Veracruz during the 1940–1941 field season, where Stirling was leader of a joint National Geographic Society and Smithsonian Institution Archaeological Expedition, which also included Stirling's wife, Marion, Philip Drucker, and an archaeological team. As Matthew Stirling (1941: 287) described, Covarrubias “spoke of a site with stone monuments, well known locally but only casually visited, in the vicinity of Tapachula, State of Chiapas.” Stirling, already somewhat familiar with descriptions of “The Lands of Izapa” from earlier inspections by Ruppert and Kidder, resolved to visit the site upon hearing that the monuments there reminded Covarrubias of the great stone sculpture at the Olmec site of La Venta.

Once permissions were obtained by the Mexican authorities to clear and photograph the monuments there, the Stirlings and *National Geographic* staff photographer Richard Stewart departed for Izapa, where they spent one week in April 1941. As the quote that introduced Chapter 2 revealed, Stirling and his team located more than thirty stelae and altar monuments during that week. Two different photos of one of these monument pairs, Stela 1 and Altar 2, were included in Stirling's article and in an accompanying piece by Marion Stirling (fig. 3.1) (Matthew Stirling 1941: 280;



Figure 3.1. Marion Stirling posing beside Izapa Stela 1 and Altar 2. Photo by Richard Stewart, from Marion Stirling 1941: 327. Courtesy of the National Geographic Society.

Marion Stirling 1941: 327). Likewise, two different views of Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2 (fig. 2.26) were featured in Richard Stewart's photodocumentary that was sandwiched between the two Stirling articles. Yet beyond this brief mention of the trip to Izapa, Stirling made no further comment on the monuments, their relative dating, or their stylistic affinities.

This situation was remedied by his publication of *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico* (Stirling 1943), which included a detailed analysis of numerous monuments from Izapa (fig. 3.2).¹ In this important study, Stirling (1943: 73) was the first to comment at length on the style of the monuments at Izapa, which he described as “definitely impressionistic, [with] complete realism being studiously avoided,” and composed of numerous scrolls and curving lines. Although he asserted that the style of the Izapa monuments



Figure 3.2. Izapa Stela 2. Photo by Richard Stewart, from Stirling 1943: Plate 49b. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

was “sufficiently distinct to stand by itself,” he linked it to that of monuments at Takalik Abaj and El Baúl in Guatemala. In a similar vein, Stirling further observed that the early Long Count dates on Takalik Abaj Stelae 2 and 5 and El Baúl Stela 1 would imply, by association, that Izapa was also a very early site.² Stirling was necessarily cautious in making this assertion because, at this time, it had not yet been determined with any great certainty if the Long Count dates inscribed on the stelae from Takalik Abaj and El Baúl directly correlated with the Maya calendar.

Beyond these affinities with monuments from sites further east in Guatemala, Stirling also suggested that Izapa monuments bore formal similarities to sculpture at sites such as Tres Zapotes in

Veracruz, where early Long Count dates also appeared. Although he referred to a “Veracruz-Tehuantepec” style that encompassed Veracruz, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and Chiapas, he did not reiterate Miguel Covarrubias’ earlier suggestion that the monuments at Izapa bore a striking similarity to monuments at La Venta.

In conclusion to his study, Stirling (1943: 73) described the characteristic stela-altar pairs at Izapa as evidence for the “early spread of a stela cult . . . from the southeastern Mexican coast across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the Pacific coast region of southern Mexico, and possibly into Guatemala.” His study was the first to employ the term “cult” to describe the stela-altar phenomenon, an expression that survives in the literature even today. He was also the first to begin addressing questions of cultural influence, noting that Izapa’s geographic position made it particularly significant with regards to this issue (Stirling 1943: 72).

Several of Stirling’s observations were echoed in contemporaneous publications by J. Eric S. Thompson. In Thompson’s (1943) description of monuments from Takalik Abaj, he discussed their

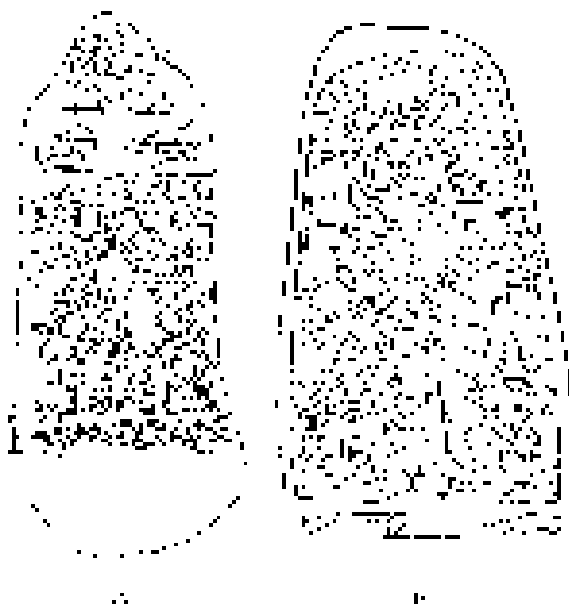


Figure 3.3. A comparison of Izapan style monuments: A, Izapa Stela 1 (drawing by Ayax Moreno, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation); B, Takalik Abaj Stela 1 (drawing by James Porter, courtesy of John Graham and the University of California, Berkeley).

general style as “reminiscent” of those of Izapa, commenting in particular on the shared use of framing bands (fig. 3.3A and B). Importantly, however, he also compared them to sculpture at La Venta, recalling Covarrubias’ earlier suggestion to Matthew Stirling (1941: 287). In his discussion, which incorporated additional monuments from southwestern Guatemala, Thompson (1943: 105) coined the phrase “Izapa style” to refer to a set of broadly shared stylistic traits that were best exemplified at the site of Izapa. Unfortunately, however, Thompson did not articulate explicitly the characteristics of this “Izapan style,” but instead resorted to generalizations that hint at a stylistic canon but never actually define it.

More innovative, on the other hand, was Thompson’s (1943: 108) discussion of the linguistic affiliations of the region that stretched from Soconusco into southwestern Guatemala. He cited Fray Alonso Ponce’s 1586 account of individuals who spoke a language “much like Zoque” in the region, and linked the area in the immediate vicinity of Izapa to Mixe-Zoquean speakers. While he suggested that Takalik Abaj also may have been occupied by Mixe-Zoquean speakers,³ he deferred to Stirling’s earlier observation that “one must bear in mind that boundaries of art styles and languages do not necessarily coincide.” This early work by Thompson is significant for its insight into the geographically liminal position of Izapa, on the frontier between Mixe-Zoquean and Mayan speakers. It was the first study to treat at length the question of the linguistic affiliation of Izapa and other sites with Izapan style monuments, a question that still, to this day, challenges scholars.

In his 1948 publication *An Archaeological Reconnaissance in the Cotzumalhuapa Region, Escuintla, Guatemala*, Thompson reiterated his opinion that consistent stylistic similarities characterized sculpture from El Baúl, Takalik Abaj, and Izapa, as well as La Venta, yet again failed to define systematically the traits that made up this style. Instead, Thompson discussed the similarities and disparities between Izapan style sculpture and sculpture in the Cotzumalguapan style, which was

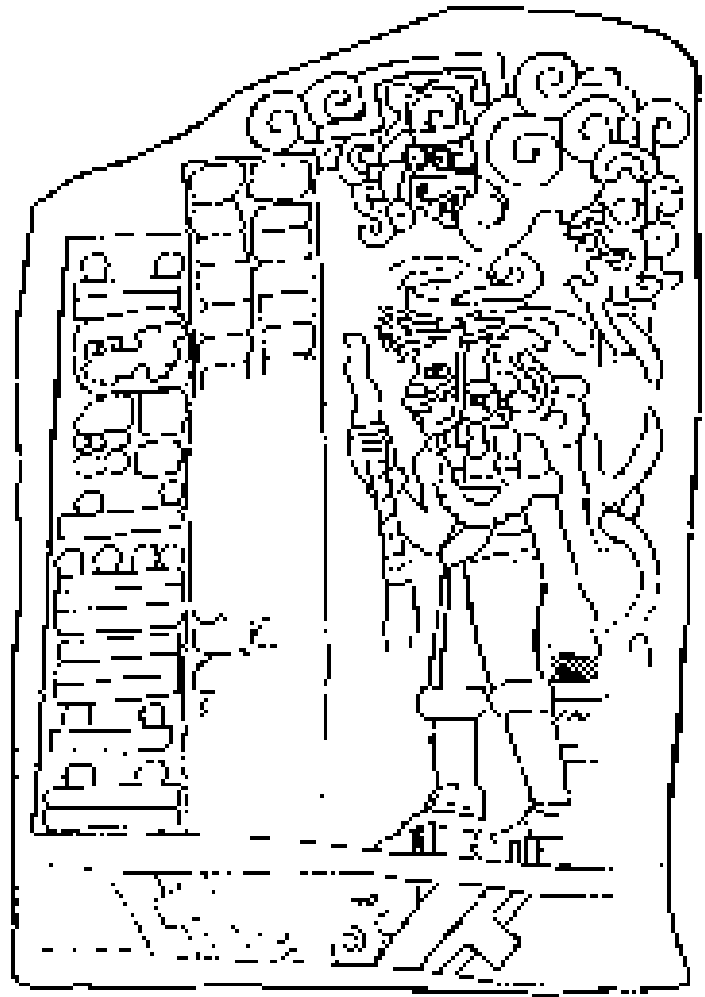


Figure 3.4. El Baúl Stela I. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

found in abundance throughout the Department of Escuintla at the site now commonly referred to as Bilbao. Although Thompson’s discussion of Izapan and Cotzumalguapan art styles was hampered by the lack of an established chronology for the region in 1948, he surmised that the Izapan style, manifested in Monument 1 from El Baúl (fig. 3.4), was the earlier of the two based primarily on its “primitive feeling” (Thompson 1948: 31).⁴ Like Stirling (1943: 73), Thompson broached the subject of the Long Count date on El Baúl Monument 1 as possible evidence in support of the antiquity of the Izapan style. However, Thompson (1948: 31–32) was much more skeptical as to whether or not such an early date corre-

lated with the Maya calendar and therefore concluded that “the dating of Izapan sculpture must, therefore, be considered still unsolved.”

Questions concerning the dating and cultural affiliations of Izapan style monuments continued to draw the attention of other researchers. In 1948 Philip Drucker submitted his “Preliminary Notes on an Archaeological Survey of the Chiapas Coast,” later published in 1951 by the Middle American Research Institute. As Drucker (1951: 151) described:

[V]ery little information has been available on this important region that formed the easiest route of communication between the ancient highland Maya centers and those of the Zapotec in Oaxaca, and seems likely to have been the channel through which Olmec influences filtered southeastward from their source north of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Although Drucker was unable to glean much insight into the ceramic chronology at Izapa based on the few test-pits he put in at the site, his study was the first to place Izapa within a broader archaeological consideration of the Soconusco region.

Thus almost ten years after the first systematic studies and descriptions of the monuments and archaeological remains at Izapa, very little concrete information existed. Although Stirling and Thompson had both noted the stylistic similarities between the sculpture at Izapa and that of Guatemalan sites such as Takalik Abaj and El Baúl, neither of them had defined these shared traits. The dating of the monuments was also problematic, and would continue to be so until an archaeological sequence had been established in the region and the correlation between the early Long Count dates on monuments from Takalik Abaj and El Baúl and the Maya calendar was clearly demonstrated. Noteworthy, however, were the astute observations of these early scholars that pointed to the temporally, stylistically, and geographically liminal role of the Izapan style in ancient Mesoamerica.

THE 1950s

During the 1950s, as during the previous decade, Izapa was the destination of various Mexican officials intent on describing the site and its monuments, although no excavations were initiated. Rafael Orellana visited Izapa in 1950 and submitted a report to the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia the same year; he later elaborated upon the report in a series of articles (Orellana 1951, 1955). His essay for the journal *Tlatoani*, published in 1952, included photographs of a number of monuments at Izapa and detailed descriptions of their compositions. Like other scholars before him, Orellana linked the imagery of the Izapa monuments to that found at sites such as Tres Zapotes, Cerro de las Mesas, La Venta, El Baúl, Takalik Abaj, and others in Chiapas. His (1955) article in *El México Antiguo* focused on Izapa Stela 21 and its associated Altar 18, which had been recently discovered by Armando Duvallier (1956a, 1956b, 1956c), then director of the Regional Museum of Anthropology and History in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas (fig. 3.5). Orellana (1955) offered an interpretation of the iconography of Stela 21, which depicts a decapitation scene and an individual transported in a palanquin, and related it to the ballgame decapitation imagery on later monuments from Chichén Itzá and Veracruz. Although Orellana's interpretive analyses no longer merit much attention, his articles were sprinkled with numerous early and valuable photographs.

Considerable progress was made, however, with Tatiana Proskouriakoff's (1950) *Study of Classic Maya Sculpture*. Although she devoted very little space to a discussion of Izapa and its monuments, she was the first to begin to articulate some of the characteristics of the Izapan style, including symbolic, geometric, and zoomorphic motifs; scenic arrangements; overlapping planes; numerous scrolls with decorative embellishments; great variability and a lack of rigidity in pattern; and “a manner of composing forms of elements of constant width and approximately equal importance, with no indication of interior detail” (Proskouri-

akoff 1950: 177, 180). Like earlier scholars, she linked this style to monuments at La Venta, Takalik Abaj, and El Baúl, while also asserting parallels to monuments at the Guatemalan Highland site of Kaminaljuyu, the Zapotec site of Monte Alban in Oaxaca, as well as those of the Early Classic Maya.

For Proskouriakoff, the importance of Izapa and the Izapan style phenomenon clearly rested in their relationship to Maya art:

The development of detailed sequences for the sculpture of the Pacific slope of Guatemala, and for independent styles such as that of Izapa and La Venta would place the Maya style in its proper environment. In the controversy about the date of La Venta and Izapa, stylistic comparison tends to support the side that would grant them considerable antiquity. . . . The study of the Maya sequence indicates that gradual progress is best revealed in changes in technical and artistic qualities, whereas violent social changes are reflected more readily in the adoption of new motifs. At Izapa we may well find both types of change, a situation of particular interest because it seems to form a link between the Maya style, the style of La Venta, and that of Monte Alban. We know virtually nothing of the architectural remains of the site or its ceramics, and these should prove of absorbing interest. (1950: 183)

As far as Proskouriakoff was concerned, Izapa was one of several sites whose secrets would illuminate the origins and developmental trajectory of Classic Maya art. She asserted, however, that limited progress toward solving this riddle could be made until the corpus of Izapan style monuments was expanded and more was known about their relative dating. Despite this lack of data, however, Proskouriakoff (1950: 183–184) was adamant that tools such as iconographic and stylistic analysis could provide powerful insight into questions of date, cultural affinity, and influence:



Figure 3.5. Map by Armando Duvalier documenting the location of Izapa Stela 21, “El Guerrero Decapitado,” and its discovery in 1956. Courtesy of George Stuart.

Wherever even a tentative chronological sequence can be inferred, a beginning can be made to trace the character of changing artistic forms. This is most readily done through following the variations of identical or very similar motifs, but there is also a vital need to devise new approaches and new methods of treating with the variety of problems that arise. With the exception of Spinden’s splendid *Study of Maya Art* there have been few systematic attempts to treat with art styles in the perspective of time. Archaeologists tend to limit their observations to techniques or to motifs expressed and are wary of falling into “subjective” attitudes in attempting to take up consideration of aesthetic factors or artistic mannerisms. The danger is there, but it is after all no greater than that which we face when we attempt to interpret the meaning of religious symbols.

Proskouriakoff’s “call to arms” for the importance and integrity of art historical analysis came

at a time when the very canons of Precolumbian art in Mesoamerica were in their own “formative” state and when a chronological sequence in Mesoamerica had yet to be established with any certainty. Her message was firm in its assertion that the tools of iconographic and stylistic analysis—while not without their own set of dangers—could provide powerful insight into the ebb and flow of ideas between regions and throughout time. It is interesting that the next several decades of studies echoed Proskouriakoff’s assertion that the Izapan style provided a critical link between the styles of the earlier Olmec and later Maya civilizations. Such studies also reveal how critical this question of influence and its directional flow was to establishing the canon of Mesoamerican art, and how this question could, at times, be subjected to distinct regional and cultural biases.⁵

Perhaps this issue is best illustrated by the seminal 1957 *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* by Miguel Covarrubias, whose comment to Mathew Stirling that the sculpture at Izapa reminded him of “the stone sculpture at La Venta” had set much of this historical trajectory into motion.⁶ By the time this study by Covarrubias was published posthumously, the antiquity of Olmec art had been fairly well established by a series of radiocarbon dates from the Olmec site of La Venta in Tabasco, which indicated a cultural florescence during the Middle Preclassic period between the years 900 and 300 BC.⁷ While archaeology once and for all had established the *temporal* priority of Olmec art, Covarrubias was interested in defining the *stylistic* priority of Olmec art, which he defined as “vigorous” and “original” with a “simplicity and sensual realism of form” that was “the very antithesis of the formalized and rigid art of the highlands or the flamboyant baroque of the lowlands of the Classic period, both overburdened with religious symbolism and ceremonial functionalism” (Covarrubias 1957: 54). In essence, Covarrubias asserted that Olmec art represented a more pure and powerful form that was free from the “baroque” decadence of later Classic Maya art. His assertions very clearly reflected many of the earlier conclusions reached at the Sociedad Mexicana de Antro-

pología’s roundtable on the subject of Olmec and Maya relationships, which he had attended in Chiapas in 1942.⁸ The objectives of the conference, which included attempts to define the parameters of Olmec art and civilization, were summarized by Alfonso Caso:

Olmec culture is in no sense primitive. It ought rather to be called a *classical* culture, of great refinement, implying centuries of preparation and development, and which significantly influenced later cultures. . . .

This great culture, which we have encountered in ancient levels, is without a doubt the mother of other cultures, such as the Maya, the Teotihuacan, the Zapotec, and that of El Tajín, and others.⁹

Also echoing the conclusions of this early conference was Covarrubias’ premise that a very clear directional flow of influence—from the Olmec heartland to other regions of Mesoamerica including Teotihuacán and Aztec sites in the Valley of Mexico, the Maya Lowlands, and Zapotec Monte Alban—could be discerned. Perhaps best known along these conceptual lines is his famous chart showing Olmec influence in the evolution of an Olmec jaguar mask into the visages of rain gods from all parts of Mesoamerica (fig. 3.6) (Covarrubias 1957: fig. 22). As he concluded, paraphrasing Caso’s earlier assertions, evidence such as this demonstrated “that, after all, the ‘Olmec’ culture is one of the mother cultures of Middle America” (Covarrubias 1957: 65).

So where did the Izapan style phenomenon fit into Covarrubias’ scheme? While Covarrubias (1957: 65) characterized Izapan style stelae as “Olmec” in style, he simultaneously described them as “antecedents of the Maya stelae in function, style, and subject” and further elaborated:

There is an interesting survival of early forms and concepts, mainly of “Olmec” style, in stone monuments that show an evolutive or transitional style in which the simplicity and austerity of “Olmec” monumental carving gives way to the appearance

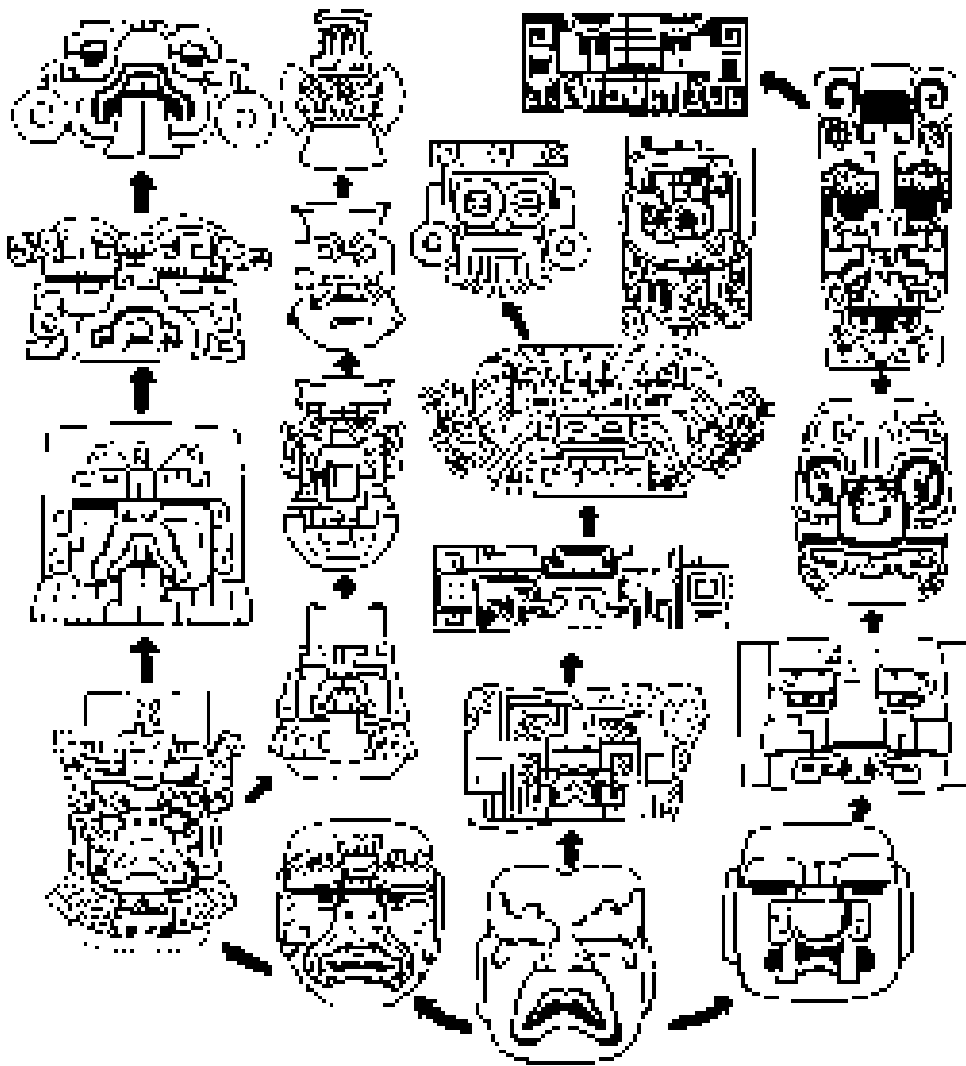


Figure 3.6.
Flowchart by
Covarrubias to
demonstrate
Olmec influence
in rain god
imagery
throughout
Mesoamerica.
After Covarru-
bias 1957:
Fig. 22.

of the meander or scroll motifs, resulting in time in a taste for the most elaborate ornamentation. (Covarrubias 1957: 166)

In effect, Covarrubias' model, which viewed Izapan art as transitional between that of the Olmec and Maya, was not entirely new, and closely followed ideas that had been postulated by earlier scholars. Yet, his suggestion of a formal deterioration or decadence through time was more novel—not to mention radical—in the face of the great priority that Classic Maya art had been given historically.¹⁰ In hindsight it is also clear that Covarrubias' model was influenced, directly or indirectly, by earlier art historical theories of scholars such as Johann Winckelmann (1968), whose *Geschichte der*

Kunst des Alterthum (History of Ancient Art), first published in 1764, applied a theory of development and decline to ancient Greek art. Such well-established theoretical models in art history provided Covarrubias with a conceptual framework on which to hang his own theories of the development and decline of major Mesoamerican art styles.

Important, too, is the fact that many of Covarrubias' fundamental assertions regarding the role and impact of Preclassic-period Olmec culture are still the topic of great debate in many circles today.¹¹ Although the Preclassic period is now better understood as a time when numerous cultural groups—including the Gulf Coast Olmec, early Pacific Coast and central Mexican peoples, Zapotec, and early Maya—were interacting and

sharing innovations, many of the architectural, sculptural, and spatial templates that would be shared across Mesoamerica undeniably made their earliest and grandest appearances in the Gulf Coast Olmec heartland during the Early and Middle Preclassic periods.

The temporally transitional role of Izapa between the Olmec and Maya civilizations also was directly influenced by increasing awareness of an extensive Late Preclassic occupation at Izapa. By 1956 Gareth Lowe of the New World Archaeological Foundation had collected a small sample of ceramics from a drainage canal at Izapa that apparently represented an undisturbed Late Preclassic refuse deposit (Lowe 1959). Also, in 1957 Michael Coe published an article entitled “Cycle 7 Monuments in Middle America: A Reconsideration,” in which he considered stylistic, archaeological, and hieroglyphic evidence for the group of monuments with early dates from Takalik Abaj (Stela 2), El Baúl (Stela 1, fig. 3.4), and Tres Zapotes (Stela C). His study argued not only that the monuments from Takalik Abaj and El Baúl cohered into a unified stylistic group with those from Izapa, but that their Long Count dates certainly did correlate with the Maya calendar, making them very early, perhaps Late Preclassic or Early Classic (Coe 1957a: 607–608). Coe further attributed these stylistic and hieroglyphic practices—as well as the development of a stela “cult”—to a directional flow of influence from the Olmec heartland and La Venta in particular.¹²

The 1950s also witnessed lively commentaries by several scholars who had begun to acknowledge that the increasing quantity and quality of evidence from Preclassic-period sites posed a challenge to the obvious evolutionary bias that terms such as “Preclassic” and “Classic” conveyed. For example, Alfred Kidder, already in 1950, wrote:

When one comes to think of it one realizes that the Maya certainly, and other groups probably, had already taken most fundamental steps in pre-Classic times and that what came after was the rich blossoming of an already fully formed Archaic bud. The

foregoing suggests that our present nomenclature fails to reflect what actually happened in Mesoamerica. (Kidder 1950: 7)

These sentiments were echoed and discussed in greater depth by Coe (1957b), who noted that many of the characteristics used to define the Classic period, such as calendrical information, hieroglyphic writing, monumental architecture, and ballcourts, were already in place by the Preclassic period.

In marked contrast to studies such as these, which focused on the indigenous accomplishments of Mesoamerican cultures, were a series of essays published in the 1950s and early 1960s that emphasized purported links between Izapa and the Old World. For example, Carlos Culebro—who had first helped draw attention to Izapa in the late 1930s—wrote an article in 1950 that, at first glance, appeared to be a plea to the government of Mexico to establish Izapa as a national archaeological zone (Culebro 1950). However, in his effort to champion this cause, he sought to demonstrate the parallels between motifs on Izapa Stela 1 and various symbols from ancient Hebrew, Phoenician, and Greek writing systems.

Culebro’s highly imaginative analysis of Stela 1 paved the way for M. Wells Jakeman’s 1958 essays on Izapa Stela 5 that emphasized the parallels and probable linkages between this imagery and that of the Middle East. Jakeman’s (1958b) analysis focused on the tree at the center of the composition on Stela 5, which he identified as the Tree of Life and compared to similar compositional formats in Assyrian art. His (1958a) monograph expanded upon these arguments and outlined a series of parallels between Izapa Stela 5 and the account of Lehi in the Book of Mormon. According to Jakeman, these purported parallels demonstrated “that this monument was carved and set up by a group of the Lehi-Nephite people of the Book of Mormon” sometime during the “late Nephite ‘United Order’ period of the Book of Mormon, circa AD 34–200, which is closely equivalent to the ‘Late Preclassic’ period of the archaeological chronology of Mesoamerica” (Jake-

man 1958a: 87). As is evident from Jakeman's essay and conclusions, his interpretations belie an obvious religious agenda that ignored Izapa Stela 5's heritage in a long and well-established Mesoamerican artistic and iconographic tradition.¹³

Equally fantastic were Clyde Keeler's (1957, 1961) interpretations of Stela 5 and Stela 2 from Izapa. Like Jakeman, Keeler placed the "Tree of Life" motifs on these stelae within Old World narrative and historical traditions, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Old Testament. He also linked the imagery to documented Asiatic shamanic practices surrounding an *axis mundi* envisioned as a World Tree. In particular, however, Keeler (1961: 63) interpreted the imagery of Stela 5 as the representation of a Panamanian Cuna Indian myth of "Earthmother's parturition." Keeler made no mention of any other alternative interpretations of the Izapan imagery, suggesting instead that the representation of a Cuna myth on Izapa Stela 5 demonstrated clear ties to ancient cultural traditions of the Old World, perhaps as the result of "Phoenician trading colonies" in the Americas (Keeler 1961: 66).

THE 1960s

Coe's first edition of *Mexico* returned discussion to more productive—yet vexing—questions, such as Izapa's role during the Late Preclassic as a "connecting link in time and space between the earlier Olmec and later Classic Maya" (Coe 1962: 100). Echoing Covarrubias, he qualified:

The [Izapan] art style as expressed in bas-reliefs is highly distinctive. Although obviously derived from the Olmec, it differs from it in its use of large, cluttered, baroque compositions and anecdotal scenes with groups of people. (99)

The preeminent Precolumbian art historian George Kubler (1962: 212) concurred with Coe's assessment, adding that while Izapan sculpture traced its roots to earlier Olmec examples, it demonstrated more "narrative ambitions" as in its incorporation of framing bands and landscape set-

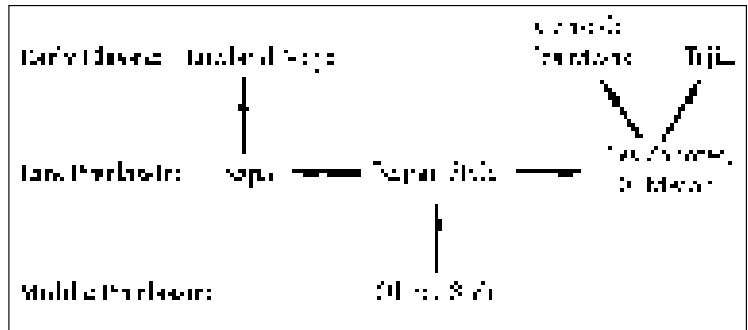


Figure 3.7. Coe's proposed sequence of lowland Preclassic and Early Classic art styles. After Coe 1965: Fig. 57.

tings.¹⁴ Coe was even more assertive in his 1965 discussion of "The Olmec Style and its Distribution," in which he stated:

It is here suggested that all known major art styles of lowland Mesoamerica have a single origin in the Olmec style. The latter is restricted to the culture of the climax zone during the Middle Preclassic, and extensions of that culture. From this was derived the Izapan style of the Late Preclassic, which spread across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the Pacific slope and lowlands. . . . From the Pacific slope, Izapan art eventually spread southeast and up across the Valley of Guatemala and down into the Peten lowlands, where it could have given rise to the earliest known Maya art.

The ultimate relation of Classic Maya with Olmec can therefore be traced through the medium of the Izapan style. (Coe 1965: 773)

This assessment also was illustrated in a graph by Coe entitled "Proposed Sequence of Lowland Art Styles in Preclassic and Early Classic Periods," in which arrows placed the Izapan style squarely as a transitional event between the evolution of Olmec and later art styles (fig. 3.7). He cautioned, however, that monuments in the Izapan style at Olmec heartland sites such as Tres Zapotes might indicate Gulf Coast origins for the Izapan style (Coe 1965: 773).¹⁵

Having outlined the temporal and geographic significance of the Izapan style, Coe went on to reiterate his opinion that Olmec art was “classic” while Izapan—and Maya—art was “baroque”:

By the Late Preclassic, the lowland artist had evidently become more interested in an almost overdone application of iconographic detail (see, for instance, Stela 5 at Izapa) to the detriment of the sculptural qualities which we can appreciate in Olmec art. (Coe 1965: 774)

Importantly, to substantiate these claims, Coe cited the pioneering art historical work of Heinrich Wölfflin (1932), who had argued that European art was characterized by alternating periods of “classic” or balanced, linear, plastic art forms and “baroque” or more agitated and painterly styles. Wölfflin’s study, published first in Germany in 1915 and translated into English in 1932, was probably the most influential theory of the cyclical evolution of Western art history of the twentieth century. However, one of the fundamental weaknesses of Wölfflin’s treatise was its inattention to other significant cultural forces, and its alternate emphasis on purely internal, stylistic, and formally based dynamics. The same limitations that characterized Wölfflin’s work, such as a lack of consideration for the subtleties of geographic influences and specific cultural conventions, would continue to plague scholars’ attempts to adequately define and assess the role of the Izapan style within the continuum of Mesoamerican art. Despite Coe’s pioneering efforts to carve a significant place for Izapan style monuments within the corpus of Pre-columbian art, Mesoamerican scholars’ work over the next decades would be consistently hampered by a lack of careful differentiation between notions of style and iconography, two powerful art historical tools that evaluate very different sets of data.

Coe continued to describe Izapan civilization as transitional between the Olmec and the Maya and emphasize its dramatic effect on the rise of “civilized life” in Mesoamerica in his book *The Maya*, published the following year (Coe 1966: 69).¹⁶ He further defined certain key characteris-

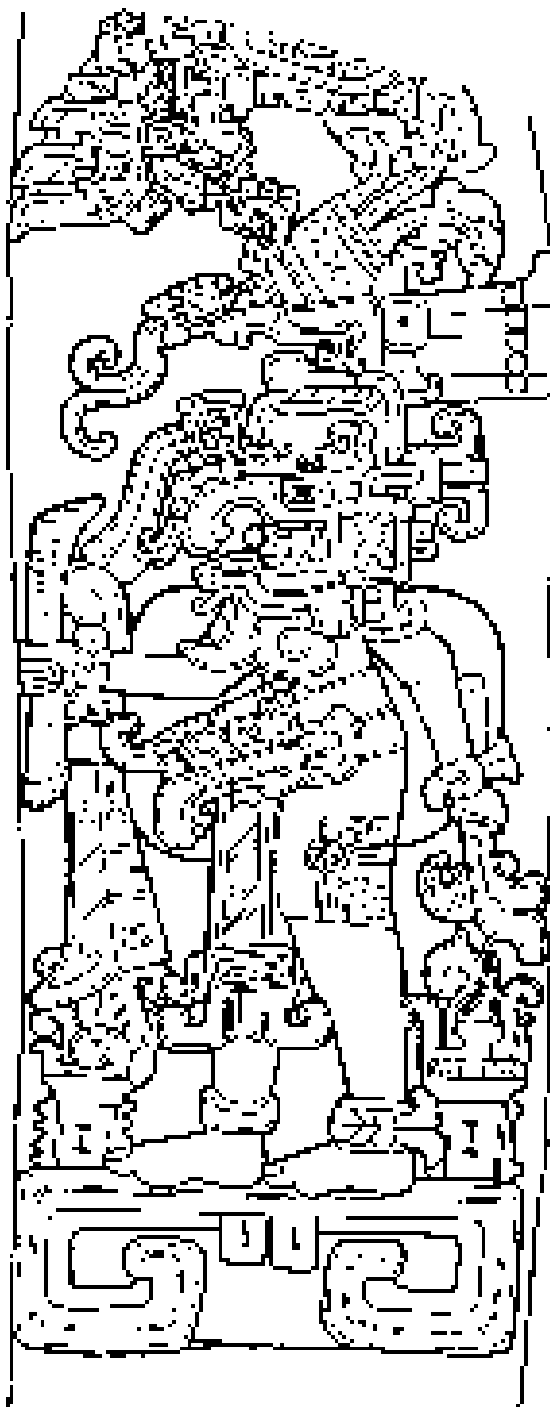


Figure 3.8. Kaminaljuyu Stela 11. Drawing by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

tics of the Izapan style, including its preference for the stela-altar format, and “a highly painterly, two-dimensional art style which emphasizes historical and mythic scenography with great attention to plumage and other costume details” (Coe 1966: 61). Particularly important was his discussion of

the probable linguistic affiliation of Izapa with the Zoquean language family, which grew out of an earlier exhaustive study of the Soconusco region (Coe 1961, 1965: 60).

By the mid-1960s, scholars appear to have been fairly comfortable with the identification of a Late Preclassic-period florescence at the site of Izapa.¹⁷ While Gareth Lowe and J. Alden Mason (1965: 201–202) still bemoaned the lack of thorough investigations in the Pacific coastal region of Chiapas, they concluded that ceramic evidence and figurine types from Izapa fit comfortably into the Late Preclassic or Protoclassic periods, and that the corpus of stelae from Izapa also suggested a similar date.¹⁸ The dating of the Izapa stelae, which relied primarily on stylistic analogy, had been further bolstered by the late 1950s discovery of Kaminaljuyu Stelae 10 (fig. 1.5) and 11 (fig. 3.8) in a datable context. Stela 11, in particular, bore striking similarities to monuments at Izapa, and had been unearthed beneath a floor dated securely to the Late Preclassic period.¹⁹ Lowe's (1965) comparison of excavated Late Preclassic ceramic incensarios at Izapa to depictions of identical vessels at both Izapa (Stelae 5 and 24) and Kaminaljuyu (Stela 11) strongly corroborated such arguments (fig. 3.9).²⁰

Also in 1965, Suzanne Miles ambitiously attempted a stylistic seriation of monuments from the Pacific Coast, piedmont, and highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala. She first organized the monuments into chronological periods that were further subdivided according to specific stylistic criteria that included form, shape, the presence or absence of specific motifs and symbols, and the use of certain narrative devices. For example, she described monuments in her Preclassic Division Four from Kaminaljuyu, Takalik Abaj, Izapa, and El Jobó as representative of a new and innovative "Izapa narrative style." As Miles (1965: 257–259) noted, Izapa Stela 5 (see fig. 1.3) typified this dense, often "confused" narrative style, as did the imagery of Izapa Stela 2 (fig. 3.10; also see fig. 3.2), which, though considerably less dense, was still highly narrative.

Miles contrasted the more narrative style of

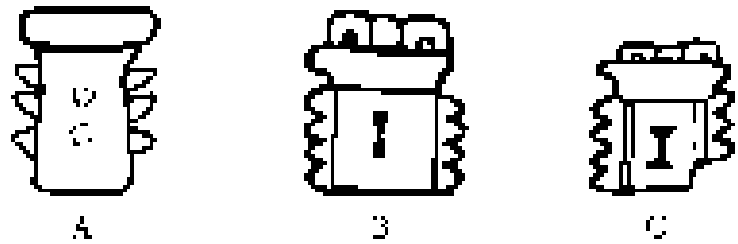


Figure 3.9. Comparison of incensarios on monuments at Izapa and Kaminaljuyu: A, Izapa Stela 5; B, Izapa Stela 24; C, Kaminaljuyu Stela 11. Drawings by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

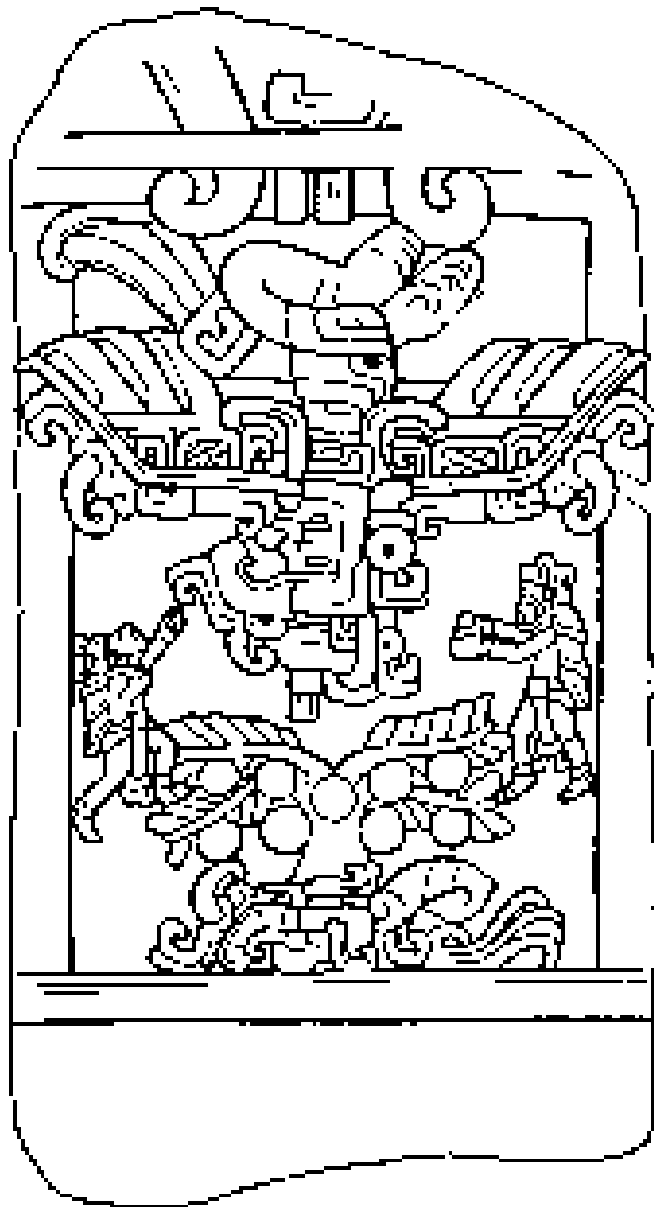


Figure 3.10. Izapa Stela 2. Drawing by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

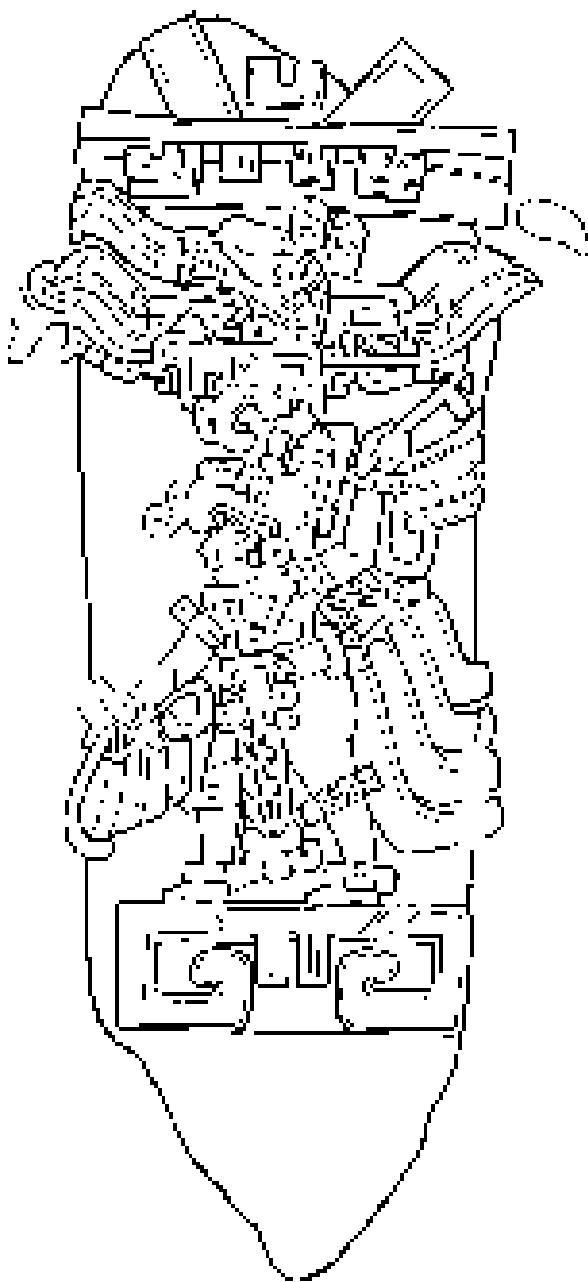


Figure 3.11. Izapa Stela 4. Drawing by Ajax Moreno.
Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

Division Four to that of Division Three, which she deemed the “apogee of Preclassic sculpture,” and to which she assigned monuments such as Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (fig. 3.8), Izapa Stela 4 (fig. 3.11), and a monument from Chocólá. Division Two, which also included monuments from Izapa, Kaminaljuyu, and other sites, was more “developmental” and “characterized by highly dynamic, vigorous

depictions” that were “incipient” to those in Division Three (Miles 1965: 252, 273). Division One she reserved primarily for boulder sculptures.

As Miles (1965: 237, 251) noted several times throughout her essay, her criteria for these groupings were fluid and therefore a certain “margin of error” existed in her assignment of sculptures to specific stylistic divisions.²¹ This is best illustrated by comparing Izapa Stela 2 (figs. 3.2 and 3.10), which Miles placed in Division Four, to Izapa Stela 4 (fig. 3.11), which she placed in Division Three. While her reasons for placing Stela 2 in Division Four undoubtedly rested on the presence of multiple, interacting figures, one can clearly see that the central figures in both compositions are almost identical, as are the top framing bands. In fact, as will be demonstrated and discussed throughout this book, it is these very *consistencies* that not only tend to weaken Miles’ assertion of stylistic and thematic divisions but also inform us about broader narrative patterns that characterize many Izapan style monuments.

Interesting in hindsight, too, was Miles’ (1965: 237) assertion that most of the monuments from this Chiapas-Guatemala region were “primarily religious in function,” as they came from “ceremonial centers closely associated with religious structures.” Her classification of the monuments as “religious” versus historical would continue to characterize descriptions of Izapan monuments for the next three decades. Hence, although riddled with inconsistencies and characterizations that would, with time, prove inaccurate, her publication was the first to assemble the largest possible corpus of monuments from the Chiapas-Guatemala region and systematically compare them with attention not only to issues of style but also to archaeological context.

Lee Parsons’ important article on a newly discovered stela from the site of Bilbao, Guatemala, broached similar questions regarding the relationship between monuments in the Izapan style and their transitional role in the “unbroken tradition between Olmec and Classic Maya art” (Parsons 1967: 173). Parsons, like Miles before him, attempted to seriate the different styles of art that

comprised this transitional period, yet introduced a somewhat different set of terms and criteria: “Olmecoid” art derived from the Olmec style and dated between 600 and 300 BC; “Proto-Maya” art from 400 to 100 BC that was “technically and aesthetically outstanding”; and Izapan style art that represented a “horizon style” between 100 BC and AD 100 (Parsons 1967: 178).²² Parsons’ categories, like those of Miles, tended to be somewhat fluid. For example, while he placed Izapa Stelae 3 and 4 (fig. 3.11) in the earlier Proto-Maya category, he placed the remainder of the corpus at Izapa in the later Izapan style horizon, stating that “examples of the Proto-Maya style may be found contemporaneously with the more elaborate Izapa narrative style both at Izapa and at other localities in the Peripheral Coastal region” (Parsons 1967: 184).²³ Nevertheless, his statement that some monuments “represent mixtures of the sophisticated Proto-Maya style and the imaginative, but cruder, Izapa narrative style” belied a distinct bias that gave preference to a Classic Maya canon of forms.²⁴

While Parsons’ (1967: 195) goal throughout the study—which was to “focus attention on the dynamic role of the Peripheral Lowland region in the formation of Classic Maya civilization”—was clearly met, the approach still emphasized the role of Late Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerican art only in relationship to its forebears or followers, rather than as a coherent and powerful system in and of itself. Nonetheless, Parsons’ study was particularly significant for its emphasis on the relationship between natural paths of communication and the dissemination of stylistic traits, particularly through the “continuous lowland, coastal region extending from Veracruz and Tabasco in the north, to the Pacific Coast of Chiapas, Guatemala, and El Salvador in the south,” which he characterized as “one single, integrated region which might be called the Peripheral Coastal Lowlands” (Parsons 1967: 173).²⁵

Unlike Parsons, who seemed focused on identifying the origins of Maya art, Ignacio Bernal was interested in defining the legacy of Olmec art in his 1969 book *The Olmec World*. He referred to the

inhabitants of Izapa as “Olmecoid,” and described the monuments there as having many Olmec traits that had fused with a locally distinct style (Bernal 1969: 12). Echoing Covarrubias (1957) and Coe (1962), Bernal also contrasted the “baroque and florid style” of the Izapa monuments to those “in the pure Olmec manner.” An indebtedness to Old World art historical models was further demonstrated when he addressed the changing direction of influences during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods—first from the Olmec heartland to Izapa, and then from Izapa back to Tres Zapotes in the Olmec region—as comparable to that of “Rome influencing Greece” (Bernal 1969: 172). Nonetheless, although Bernal consistently demonstrated an Olmec-centric perspective throughout his study, he in the end admitted that, perhaps, Izapan style art “could be a tie between the Olmec and the Maya” (Bernal 1969: 185).²⁶

The year 1969 also was marked by the publication of Susanna Ekholm’s *Mound 30a and the Early Preclassic Ceramic Sequence of Izapa, Chiapas, Mexico*, which provided the first thorough presentation of the chronological sequence at Izapa during the Early and Middle Preclassic periods. Her study established a pattern of occupation at Izapa that emerged during the Early Preclassic period and continued through the Middle Preclassic, at which point Mound 30a first assumed a significant size (Ekholm 1969: 14).²⁷ Although her chronology did not extend into the Late Preclassic period, she suggested that significant changes occurred during the Middle Preclassic period (900–600 BC), in which shifting patterns of interaction between the Olmec and Maya regions were reflected in the pottery assemblage at Izapa. She also dated Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2 (fig. 2.26) to the Middle Preclassic period, referring to it as “La Venta-like” and noting that “in stone sculpture the Izapeños surely followed Olmec antecedents” (Ekholm 1969: 100). While Ekholm contributed to the establishment of a solid ceramic chronology for Izapa, she continued to discuss Izapa and its sculpture in terms of relationships to the east and west, confirming relationships to both but stopping short of absolutely associating any of

the ceramic complexes—or associated chronological periods—with a specific ethnic group.

THE 1970s

The 1970s were ushered in with an important research symposium entitled “Observations on the Emergence of Civilization in Mesoamerica,” held in Austria in 1970.²⁸ Diverse definitions of “civilization” were offered during the course of the conference, from those that emphasized trade and the distribution of limited natural resources to those that considered the varied ecosystems of ancient Mesoamerica and the advent of hieroglyphic writing. Importantly, in her contribution to the symposium and published volume, Proskouriakoff (1971) departed from these well-established approaches and instead focused on the role that monumental art played within conceptualizations of “Mesoamerican civilization”:

Although writing is often mentioned as a basic factor in industrial civilization, the importance, in developing societies, of visual communication through the medium of the arts is often overlooked. When writing and mathematics were still specialized esoteric arts, the community relied largely on visual imagery, both for the creation of efficient and amenable surroundings and for the expansion and refinement of ritual sentiments. The monumental arts, hand in hand with spectacular ritual, provided validation for hierarchical society and maintained communication between [the] administration and the populace. The invention of visual forms capable of denoting complex non-material entities and relations was no mean accomplishment of the fine arts. (Proskouriakoff 1971: 147)

Her article was especially significant for the primacy that it gave to monumental sculpture as a vehicle that could provide insight into ritual, politics, and society through its presentation of powerful iconic imagery and narratives.²⁹ Even more

significantly for this discussion, Proskouriakoff directly challenged the assumptions of earlier authors such as Miles (1965) that the content of Izapa sculpture was primarily religious or mythic rather than historical. Instead, she suggested that the diverse combinations of visual symbols on monuments at Izapa warranted its recognition as not only a “highly organized symbolic system” but one that depicted “various events or social conditions validated and controlled by the natural order of the universe” (1971: 151). To Proskouriakoff, the imagery at Izapa did not neglect religion or myth, but rather wove these concerns into compositions that commented directly on their relationship to sociopolitical structure and order. While she did not dwell at length on an analysis of the Izapan style, she did describe it as one that was “uniform and consistent” and that provided “precedents for some compositions of the Classic Maya” (Proskouriakoff 1971: 150). Moreover, she emphasized the dynamic role that this specific style played in the “formulation of a very complex iconographic symbolism which later characterizes the Classic styles” and, overall, its unique presentation of historically based imagery.³⁰

Parsons revisited the stylistic and iconographic relationships visible in Izapan style monuments in his (1973) report of recently discovered Takalik Abaj Stela 4 (fig. 3.12). In this brief article, he broached a subject that would be further developed in his (1986) monograph, which was the relative influence exerted by various Late Preclassic sites on the development of Classic Maya art. While he described Takalik Abaj Stela 4 as Izapan in style, he suggested that it bore a closer stylistic relationship to the art of Kaminaljuyu than that of Izapa, which was located only fifty kilometers away. Despite this assessment, which he did not pursue in greater depth, he reasserted his (1967) conclusions that Izapan style art was transitional between Olmec and Classic Maya traditions.

In contrast to these publications from the early 1970s that sought to articulate the historically specific and important role of Izapan style art was Mino Badner’s (1972) publication entitled *A Possible Focus of Andean Artistic Influence in Mesoamer-*

ica. This essay harkened back to studies from the 1950s in which external influences were credited for the innovation of Izapan style monuments. Badner asserted that the iconographic repertoire of Izapan style monuments revealed striking congruencies with art from the Peruvian highlands, particularly that from the site of Chavín de Huantar, which flourished from circa 1000 to 500 BC. While Badner (1972: 23–24) was hesitant to suggest any directional flow for the transmission of these motifs, suggesting instead that they might represent a vague “Andean and Mesoamerican reciprocity,” he did submit that the Pacific Coast of Guatemala and Chiapas was the locus of this interaction.

The mid-1970s were highlighted by the publication of V. Garth Norman’s (1973) *Izapa Sculpture, Part I: Album*, which presented the first extensive compilation of large-scale photos and drawings of thirty-two of the most important monuments from Izapa. The album included a photo of each monument and, on the opposite page, a retouched photo in which Norman had traced the outlines of the imagery. The great significance of this publication, produced in conjunction with the ongoing excavations and research of the New World Archaeological Foundation at Brigham Young University, was that it made readily available—for the first time—a large corpus of monuments from Izapa in a single volume.

Also published by Norman (1976) was *Izapa Sculpture, Part II: Text*, which provided a detailed iconographic analysis of most of the stelae, altars, and other miscellaneous monuments that had been discovered at the site. The strength of Norman’s second publication was its inclusion of line drawings or photos of all the most important monuments as well as a detailed description of each. The weakness of the volume rested on its use of temporally and geographically distant Mesoamerican models drawn, for instance, from Aztec and central Mexican sources, to interpret the iconography. Nevertheless, Norman made several noteworthy insights into the iconography of Late Preclassic Izapa, such as his suggestion that many of the scenes bore striking parallels to pas-

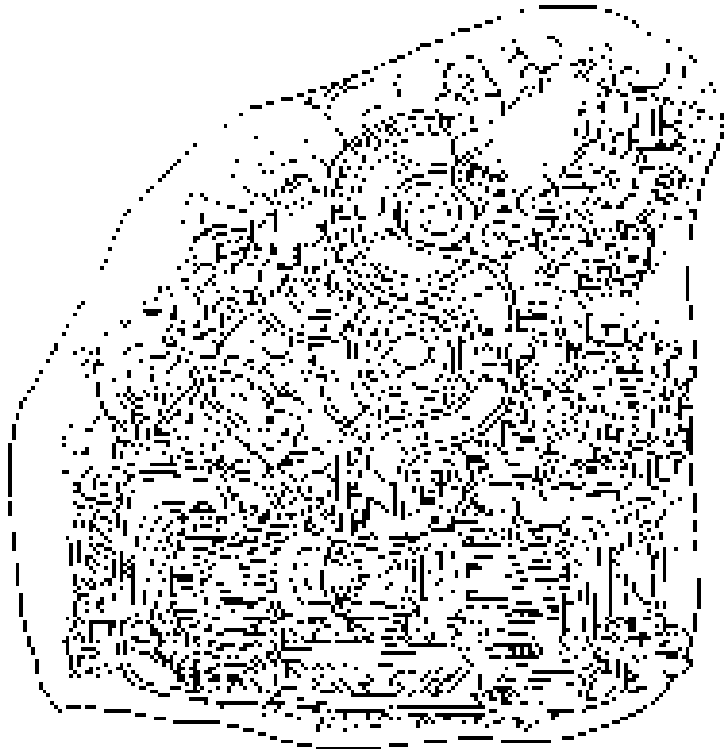


Figure 3.12. Takalik Abaj Stela 4. Drawing by author.

sages from the K’iche’ Maya *Popol Vuh*. Norman (1976: 4, 325–326) also concurred with earlier suggestions by Miles (1965: 237) that sculpture at Izapa was primarily religious in function, dedicated to mythological narratives and themes of origins, death, and the afterlife. His analysis, like that of others before him, dismissed any historical or political implications of the imagery, defining it instead as a kind of “timeless” account of gods and mythic characters.³¹ Also woven throughout his text were commentaries on the astronomical symbolism of the imagery, as well as suggestions that there were significant directional relationships between monuments within their respective groups at the site.³²

Norman (1976: 287–321) also included in his 1976 publication a section devoted to related sculpture from other sites such as Kaminaljuyu, La Venta, Tres Zapotes, and El Baúl, with large-scale photos of representative monuments as well as a detailed presentation of their shared iconography. Particularly helpful was his discussion of the distribution of Izapan style monuments, which

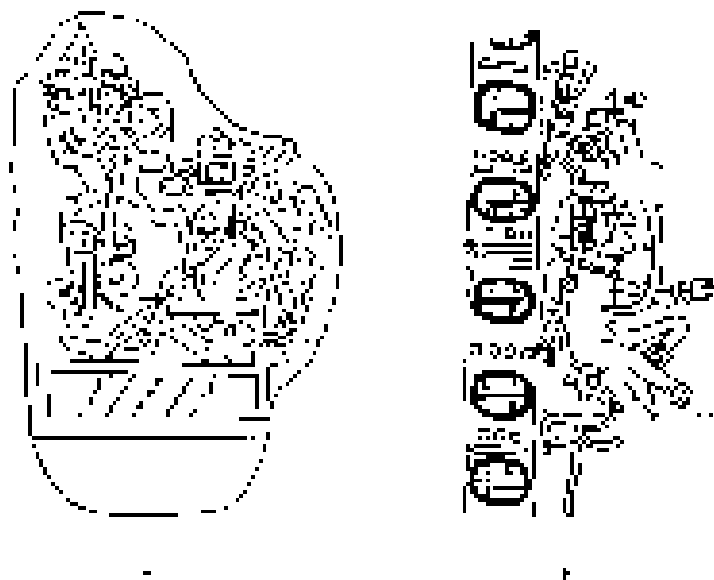


Figure 3.13. Examples from Miller's (1974) study of twisted cords and umbilical symbolism: A, Izapa Stela 50 (drawing by Ayax Moreno, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation); B, Page 19 of the Paris Codex (drawing by Matthew Looper).

attempted to document the geographic and temporal spread of the Izapan style phenomenon (Norman 1976: 317–321). Although it is clear that Norman viewed the Izapan phenomenon as the logical successor to the heritage of the Middle Preclassic Olmec, as well as a precocious antecedent to later Maya art, he was careful to denote its own unique and sophisticated narrative quality.³³

With the Izapa monuments now published in one coherent volume, the latter half of the 1970s witnessed increased attention to their iconography. For example, several Izapan monuments were included in an important study (1974) of twisted cords and umbilical symbolism by Arthur Miller. Miller's essay, which considered a broad range of Mesoamerican ethnographic evidence as well as iconographic examples of intertwined serpents and cords, firmly established the birthing, lineage, and otherworldly associations of this repertoire. In particular, Miller discussed the imagery of Izapa Stela 50 (fig. 3.13A), noting the presence of a conflated serpent/umbilicus motif that emerges from the torso of a skeletal figure. He compared this to a similar element on page 19 of the Paris Codex (fig. 3.13B) (see Villacorta and Villacorta 1930: 212), asserting that such evidence spoke to the striking

degree of iconographic continuity that characterized Mesoamerica from Preclassic to Postclassic times. Based on the presence of this iconographic system of supernatural communication and generation at Izapa, Miller concurred with earlier suggestions by Miles (1965: 237) and Norman (1976: 4) that monuments at Izapa were primarily religious, rather than political, in subject matter.

Miller's suggestion of iconographic continuity from the Late Preclassic period through the Postclassic was a timely one. In the same year, the seminal debate between George Kubler and Gordon Willey that addressed the integrity of a Mesoamerican ideological system versus the omnipresent danger of disjunction across time and space was published.³⁴ Willey (1973) maintained that Mesoamerica could be viewed as a "unified cultural tradition" and that methods like ethnographic analogy (or the direct historical approach)—in which inferences are drawn between people, objects, and cultures within a geographically and historically circumscribed framework—were warranted within the domain of Mesoamerican archaeology, anthropology, and art history. Kubler (1973), on the other hand, warned of the dangers in such methods and pointed to the lesson best illustrated by Erwin Panofsky (1955: 40–54), who had demonstrated that later cultures may indeed use forms created by earlier civilizations, but that they might just as likely refashion their meaning, resulting in situations of formal continuity but symbolic disjunction. Miller's (1974) suggestions, and actually much of the insight offered by scholars concerning the legacy of the Izapan style, hinged on the underlying assumption of a unified Mesoamerican cultural system, a notion that had first been postulated by Paul Kirchhoff in 1943.³⁵

The 1970s and early 1980s also were marked by a series of contributions by Jacinto Quirarte (1973, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1981) in which he scrutinized recurring patterns of iconography in the framing bands of Izapan style monuments.³⁶ In these articles, Quirarte questioned the traditionally marginal place that Izapan style art occupied within broader studies of Mesoamerican art:

Even when the distinct formal and thematic programs of this sculpture are pointed out, its role as an intermediary, a transitional art between Olmec and Maya, is emphasized. The geographical position of the sites where these sculptures have been found and the temporal horizons assigned them make this view seem most appropriate and correct. The question raised here is whether these works are to be considered primarily as links between these two cultures or whether they are to be considered as formulating new solutions as well. (Quirarte 1973: 5; also see 1976: 75)

In answering this query, Quirarte's analyses sought to define the techniques and pictorial conventions that uniquely characterize Izapan style art. He pointed to the tendency toward abstraction in the upper framing bands of Izapan style stelae compared to more naturalistic Olmec examples of framing bands as that on La Venta Altar 4, which plainly represents the maw of a feline creature (Coe 1965: 73; Quirarte 1973: 9). He perceptively suggested that these horizontal bands at Izapa be understood as narrative frames that defined the enclosed pictorial field as stages where events took place (Quirarte 1973: 18).³⁷ In terms of iconography, Quirarte formulated detailed assemblages of symbols and themes that recurred on Izapan style monuments. He also addressed stylistic considerations, such as the novel formal mechanisms that were employed by Late Preclassic artists, which revealed a concern with legible spatial frameworks; attention to overlap and to the diminution of figure size in space; and a varied approach to the handling of the monument's surface, including deeply sculpted transitions between foreground and background (Quirarte 1973: 27–28). Importantly, Quirarte also qualified Coe's (1962) assessment of the "baroque" qualities of Izapan style art:

Although Izapan-style images appear overly complicated at first glance, the fact is that the repertoire of elements, motifs, and

themes is not that extensive. Neither is their presentation. The curvilinear aspects of Izapan-style art, the most immediately apparent characteristics, give this art that "busy" look. Yet the artist(s) took great care to define figures and objects as precisely as possible according to established pictorial conventions. The contours of all elements and motifs define their shape as well as their volume. (Quirarte 1977: 282)

While it is easy to disagree with Quirarte's suggestion that the range of themes represented in Izapan style art is limited, his more balanced assessment of the style itself was refreshing. As he asserted, Izapan style art is characterized by a tension between the central narrative imagery, the framing bands and various secondary iconographic motifs, and the negative space of the picture plane. In fact, it is this very tension—and balance between negative space and densely filled pockets of volutes and detail—that ultimately contributes to the formal successes of the Izapan style.

Quirarte's (1977) "Early Art Styles of Mesoamerica and Early Classic Maya Art" moved away from a purely systematic analysis of motifs and framing bands and broached discussion of the content of the central narrative images of Izapan style art. Echoing others before him (Miles 1965; Miller 1974; Norman 1976), Quirarte (1977: 265, 281) asserted that the bulk of imagery in Izapan art was mythic in nature and concerned the activities of deities, deity impersonators, and other celebrants. This essay by Quirarte appeared in an important volume edited by Richard E. W. Adams (1977) that sought to synthetically examine the origins and development of Maya civilization from a variety of regional and methodologically distinct vantage points. Also included in the volume was an essay by Lowe (1977), which examined ceramic, linguistic, and sculptural evidence for Mixe-Zoque and Maya patterns of interaction. His contribution emphasized the important corridors of communication that existed during the Late Preclassic period and with which Izapa was intricately involved.³⁸ Coe's

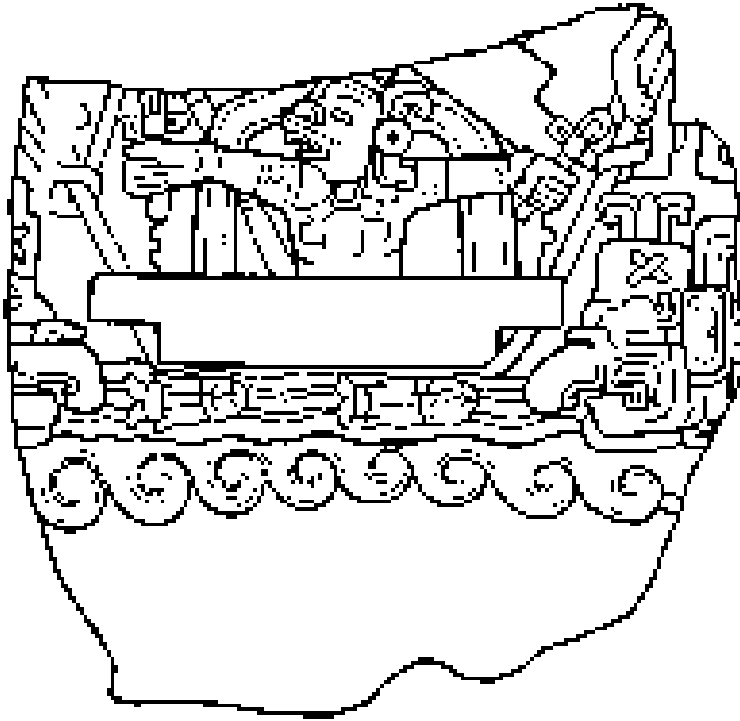


Figure 3.14. Izapa Stela 67. Drawing by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

(1977) contribution to the same volume revisited the thorny question of what role Olmec and Izapán culture had played in the development of Maya civilization. In his essay he reiterated his belief that the developmental impetus for the evolution of Maya civilization was attributable to the geographic region encompassing the Gulf Coast, Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Pacific plain, and Guatemalan Highlands.

Meanwhile, archaeologists working at other important Pacific slope sites were tackling similar questions. In their 1978 report of exploratory investigations at the site of Takalik Abaj, John Graham, R. F. Heizer, and Edwin Shook echoed Parsons' (1973) conclusion that monuments from Takalik Abaj were more closely related to stylistic developments at Kaminaljuyu than those at Izapa, despite Takalik Abaj's close proximity to Izapa. While they acknowledged that some monuments such as Takalik Abaj Stela 4 (fig. 3.12) shared important iconographic relationships to others at Izapa (such as Stelae 22 and 67) (fig. 3.14), they asserted that fundamentally different subject mat-

ter was expressed in the corpus of monuments at the two sites.³⁹ Based on this, they concluded that there were "clearly major cultural differences, and presumably political ones as well, between Izapa and neighboring Guatemala" (Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1978: 98). These sentiments were reiterated by Graham (1979), who bemoaned Thompson's (1943) early assessment of monuments from Takalik Abaj as "Izapa[n]" in style, a characterization that continued to persist in the literature of this time. Graham reasserted the fundamental differences in the sculpture at the two sites, pointing to the similarity of Takalik Abaj Stela 5 (fig. 1.9) to Early Classic Maya art in its emphasis on fairly static historical portraiture, the incorporation of hieroglyphic panels, and the lack of representational space. In contrast, he correctly noted the predilection at Izapa for highly narrative scenes within carefully constructed representational space, and the almost complete lack of hieroglyphic notation. Graham's discerning observations were an important contribution to ongoing discussions of the nature and extent of an Izapa style sphere.⁴⁰

Despite such progress, the decade of the 1970s ended with as many questions as answers. Although marked by a number of seminal publications, the decade failed to resolve Izapa's role within the continuum of Mesoamerican civilization. No clear consensus regarding the function of sculpture at Izapa—whether it was historical or mythic in content, for example—had emerged. Equally lacking was any agreement concerning the relationship of Izapa and its art to neighboring sites and the greater southeastern Mesoamerican region as a whole.

THE 1980s

New insight into the predicaments of the seventies was provided by the publication of *Izapa: An Introduction to the Ruins and Monuments* by Gareth Lowe, Thomas Lee, and Eduardo Martínez Espinosa in 1982. This enormously significant work presented an in-depth synthesis of the archaeological investigations at Izapa under the direction of the New World Archaeological Foun-

dation and included extensive photos of artifacts, monuments, and excavations. Topographic and climatic analyses, as well as a discussion of the historical role of cacao in the Soconusco region, were also featured. Most important, however, were the detailed discussions of each of the major monument groups at the site, which included descriptions of the prominent features and archaeological context of the monuments within each group, as well as detailed diagrams of the plazas that showed the locations of the various stelae and altars. Beyond providing an invaluable summary of the archaeology at Izapa, the volume also elaborated on Lowe's (1977) discussion of the cultural and linguistic affiliations of the site, perched on the boundary between Mayan- and Mixe-Zoquean-speaking groups. Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 10–15) agreed with earlier scholars such as Coe (1961, 1965) that Izapa was located at the south-easternmost extension of the Mixe-Zoque population boundary, and commented at length on the communication and economic interactions with both the neighboring lowlands and highlands that this position afforded. Most strikingly, Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 317) departed from previous assertions that the primary message of the Izapa monuments was religious, and instead expanded upon Proskouriakoff's (1971) suggestions by submitting that at least some of the imagery involved themes of (possibly historical) people, commerce, and communal prestige.

Interestingly, Lowe (in Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 17) took particular issue with the loose use of the phrases "Izapan" and "Izapan style" to describe the varied sculptural production that characterized the period between the decline of the Olmec and the rise of Classic Maya civilization. As he noted, such terms implied a specific point of origin for the style at Izapa, whose appearance there was probably only the regional manifestation of a "much wider and very long sculptural transition." In an attempt to clarify Izapa's place within this broader chronology, Lowe (in Lowe, Lee, and Martínez [1982: 23]) emphasized that most of the Izapa sculptural corpus had been "designed and executed for contemporaneous

group function" within the confines of the Guillen phase, approximately 300–50 BC. He also addressed the lack of "stylistic evolution" visible in the Izapa corpus, a view that contradicted that of Miles (1965), who had sought to establish a stylistic seriation of many of the Izapan monuments.

Although Lowe's assertion that the terms "Izapan" and "Izapan style" were problematic and vague was absolutely correct, he did not proceed to offer a more refined definition of what constituted the specific style at Izapa, or how it differed from the greater Late Preclassic "Izapan style" sculptural phenomenon. What the volume as a whole did do, however, was define and describe in detail the ceramic evidence for the Guillen-phase dating of the monuments at Izapa, as well as address any associated radiocarbon dates that helped to anchor this period in which Izapa reached the apex of its growth (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 133–135).

As if in response to Lowe's lamentation about the inconsistent use of terms such as "Izapan style," Virginia Smith (1984) authored a study that sought to explicitly define the form and content of Izapa sculpture. Like Lowe, she observed that the lack of coherently defined art styles had generated much confusion in Mesoamerican archaeology and art history, especially in relation to the Izapan style manifestation. Smith commenced with a detailed examination and statistical analysis of recurring visual traits on the twenty-four best-preserved stelae at Izapa, which provided the basis for her ensuing comparative discussion of monuments from Kaminaljuyu, Takalik Abaj, and the Maya Lowlands (Smith 1984: 36).⁴¹ She concluded:

[o]f the dozens of sites along the Pacific Coast of Mexico and Guatemala, none compares well to Izapa. Far from being a "connecting link in time and space between the earlier Olmec civilization and the Classic Maya" art styles (M. D. Coe 1962: 100), the Izapa style is unique. (Smith 1984: 48–49)

Smith further asserted that the term "Izapa[n] style" should only be used to describe works of art

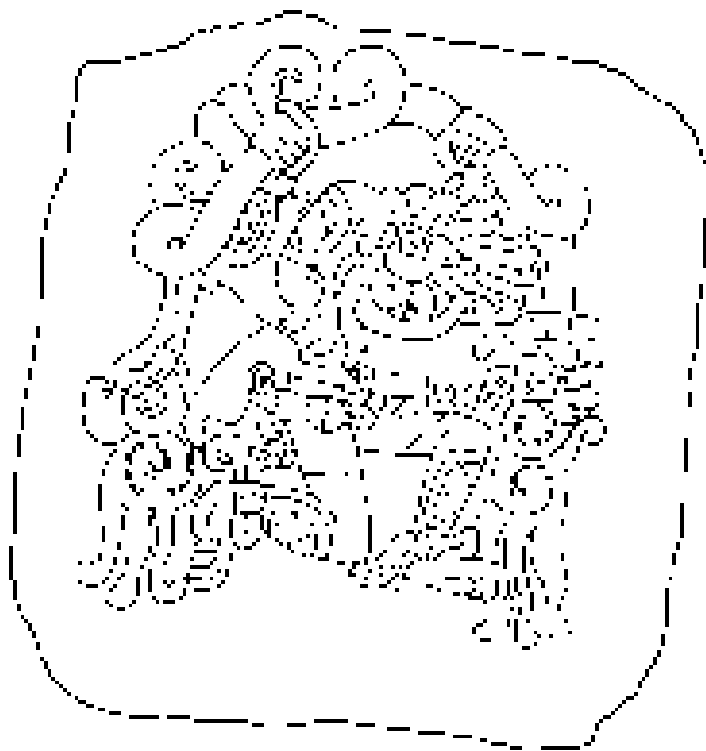


Figure 3.15. Kaminaljuyu Stela 19. Drawing by author.

from the site of Izapa itself, as the style was localized and short lived. In fact, she declared that Izapa sculpture demonstrated direct links to only two other Late Preclassic monuments, Kaminaljuyu Stelae 4 and 19 (fig. 3.15), an aberration accounted for “by an Izapa artist recruited or dragged to the highlands” (Smith 1984: 49).⁴²

Unfortunately, Smith’s detailed exposition neglected its primary goal, which was to define precisely the Izapan style. What Smith did was compile a list of fifty-four recurring motifs, designs, and narrative groupings, drawn from a limited selection of monuments at Izapa. Moreover, her interpretation of the significance of these traits paid little heed to overarching iconographic themes or narrative contexts. Although presented as an “art historical” study of the monuments at Izapa, the study fell short of the potentials of art history, which seeks to do more than isolate specific groups of traits. On the other hand, Smith (1984: 44–45) did include a brief, but insightful, assessment of the carving technique typically employed at Izapa, noting that it was in stark con-

trast to an earlier Olmec carving style that emphasized subtly modeled three-dimensional forms. As she described, most monuments at Izapa were “treated as surfaces upon which images are defined, in most cases, by simply removing the background.” She further contrasted the carving style at Izapa, which emphasized techniques of overlapping and the diminution of figure size (as on Izapa Stela 18), with that of the Maya region in which much more emphasis was placed on varying carving levels or planes.

Meanwhile, Lee Parsons (1981, 1986, 1988) published a series of articles and monographs whose goal was to offer a synthesis of cultural developments in southeastern Mesoamerica between the Middle Preclassic and Late Classic periods. Parsons’ geographic point of departure was the site of Kaminaljuyu, although his study also encompassed the Chiapas-Guatemalan Highlands and adjacent Pacific coastal plain and piedmont. Like that of Miles (1965), Parsons’ analysis was grounded in an attempt to seriate a broad range of monuments, some of which had been archaeologically dated, and others whose dates could be suggested based only on an art historical analysis that sought to define individual styles and patterns of development.

While Parsons (1986: 5) acknowledged that sites such as Izapa and Takalik Abaj had coexisted during the Late and Terminal Preclassic periods (200 BC–AD 200) alongside Kaminaljuyu, he nonetheless asserted that “it was at Kaminaljuyu that the most significant proto-Maya art styles originated.” In fact, Parsons (1986: 9, 45–50; 1988) differentiated between an Izapan style manifestation at Kaminaljuyu, which he referred to as the Miraflores-Arenal tradition and credited with contributing directly to the origins of Classic Maya art, and the corpus of monuments at Izapa, which “quickly became too specialized to have a specific influence on the Maya lowlands.”⁴³ To his mind, the Izapan style was “regionally limited,” whereas the Miraflores-Arenal tradition at Kaminaljuyu was “more innovative and widely influential” (Parsons 1986: 94, 1993: 252).⁴⁴ According to Parsons, typically Izapan traits included low-relief

carving, complex narrative scenes and systems of iconography, and the use of framing bands. Traits that distinguished the Miraflores-Arenal tradition included the presence of finely incised detailing of motifs and proto-Mayan hieroglyphic texts (Parsons 1986: 49; see also Parsons 1967: 184). The finely incised detailing that Parsons referred to is well illustrated in the detailed rendering of the surface of the eccentric flints clasped in the hands of figures on Kaminaljuyu Stelae 10 and 11. This indeed stands in marked contrast to similar illustrations of presumably stone implements, as on Izapa Stela 3 and 4, which completely lack any detailed interior incisions (fig. 3.16). Ironically, scholars had traditionally avoided such careful differentiation due, at least in part, to the fact that since their discovery in the mid-1950s in an archaeologically datable context, monuments like Kaminaljuyu Stelae 10 and 11 had been used to stylistically *confirm* the Late Preclassic dating of the Izapa corpus. In retrospect, it is probable that Parsons' novel and painstaking stylistic differentiation between Izapa and Kaminaljuyu monuments was possible only *after* the Late Preclassic date of the Izapa monuments had been confirmed independently. Nonetheless, despite his meticulous analysis, Parsons insisted that Kaminaljuyu and Izapa monuments were part of a larger, regional Late Preclassic stylistic sphere, an assertion that directly contradicted Smith's (1984) assessment.

Parsons' persistent assertion that the stylistic traditions at Kaminaljuyu had a fuller impact on later artistic developments than did the contemporary Izapan style was—and continues to be—impossible to sustain. A more accurate assessment of this unique Late Preclassic period in southeastern Mesoamerica would credit overall stylistic developments—as well as innovations at specific sites—to a dynamic system of exchange and interaction that was multidirectional and multiethnic. Equally untenable was Parsons' (1986: 96) suggestion that the Late Preclassic monuments at Kaminaljuyu had a greater degree of historicity than those at Izapa. As will be explored throughout the present study, elites at Izapa, Kaminaljuyu, and other Late Preclassic sites were all actively engag-

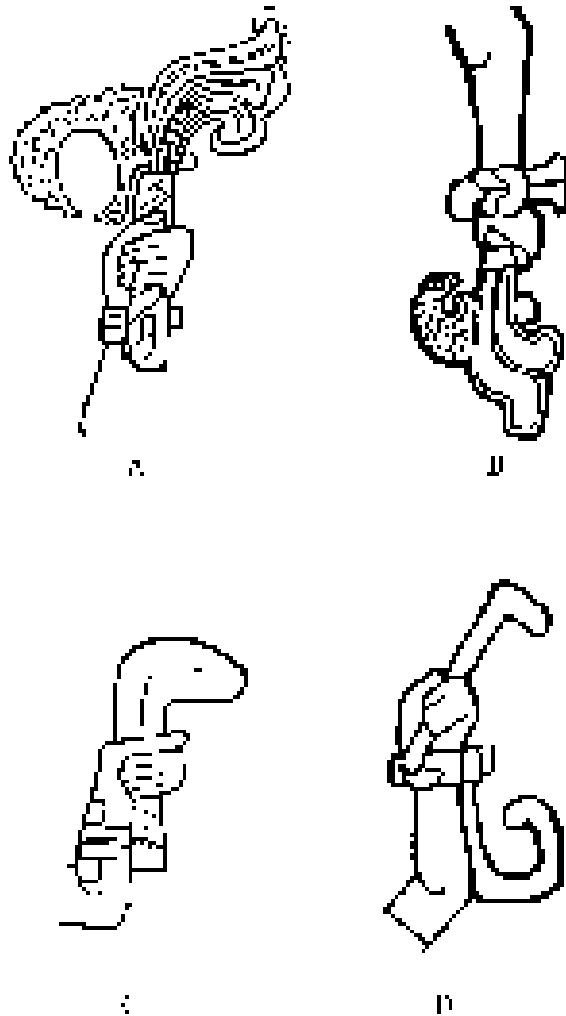


Figure 3.16. Comparison of stone implements portrayed on monuments at Izapa and Kaminaljuyu: A, Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 (drawing by author); B, Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (drawing by Ayax Moreno, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation); C, Izapa Stela 3 (drawing by Ayax Moreno, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation); D, Izapa Stela 4 (drawing by Ayax Moreno, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation).

ing in the development of new ways in which to represent the office and responsibilities of rulership. While these representations were often couched in mythic terms, they nevertheless describe in vivid detail the requisite actions and performances of Late Preclassic rulers.

In a departure from earlier, broader iconographic studies of the monuments at Izapa, Constance Cortez (1986) focused on the avian figure, commonly referred to as the Principal Bird Deity,

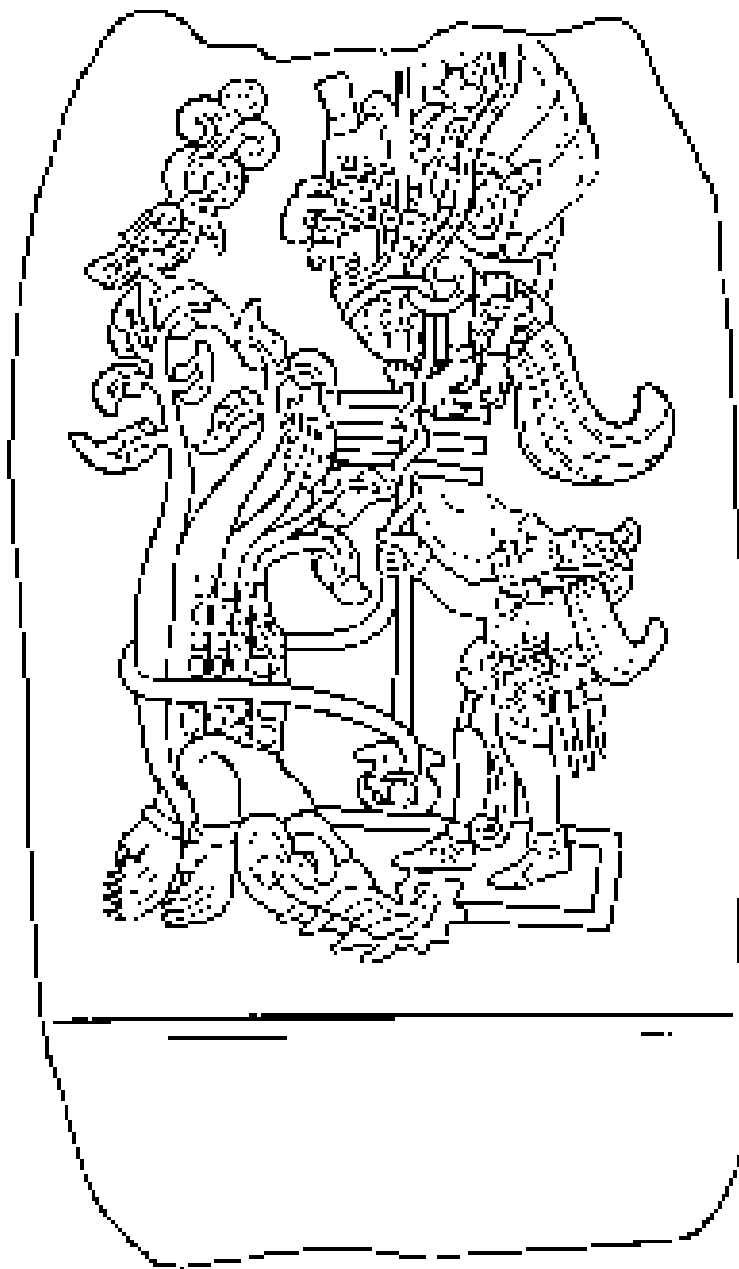


Figure 3.17. Izapa Stela 25. Drawing by Ajax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

which frequently appeared on Late Preclassic and Early Classic monuments at sites such as Izapa and Kaminaljuyu (fig. 3.17).⁴⁵ Most innovative was Cortez's use of ethnographic analogy to weave together several key narrative programs involving this avian deity at Izapa with themes found in Classic Maya artistic programs and Postclassic Maya creation accounts such as the *Popol Vuh*.⁴⁶ Significantly expanding upon suggestions by

Proskouriakoff (1971) and Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982) that monuments at Izapa depicted socially or historically specific scenes, Cortez directly linked their narratives to messages of rulership while also pointing to the iconographic and narrative continuities that persisted between Late Preclassic Izapan style monuments and Classic Maya art. Although the study reflects a distinctly Maya emphasis, it is particularly noteworthy for its analysis of the developing iconography of rulership that traces many of its roots to the canon of Late Preclassic Izapan style art.

In contrast to Cortez's detailed iconographic analysis, Ariadne Prater (1989) offered a purely stylistic assessment of the relationship between monuments from Izapa, the Pacific Coast, and the Guatemalan Highlands. Her study, which questioned the notion of "widespread Izapan influence" in this region, echoed many of the concerns previously addressed by Graham (1979), Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982), Parsons (1967, 1986, 1988), and Smith (1984). Like Smith (1984), she concluded:

The site of Izapa, though sharing certain basic cultural features with the Guatemalan Central Highlands, Pacific Coast and Piedmont, did not exert extensive influence on the sculptural arts in particular, and pre-Columbian cultural development in general, of these two areas of Mesoamerican prehistory during these periods. (Prater 1989: 125)

Pivotal to Prater's arguments were Kaminaljuyu Stelae 10 and 11. Despite the fact that they share a number of motifs and themes with monuments at Izapa, she declared that they could not accurately be classified as "Izapan" in style (Prater 1989: 126). To support her statement, Prater vividly contrasted the different carving styles present at Kaminaljuyu and Izapa. For example, she described the carving on Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 (fig. 1.5) as very shallow but well modeled, incorporating several carving planes with sloping sides as well as extensive overlapping to indicate greater depth, and enlivened by the

generous use of finely incised lines to indicate texture and define form (Prater 1989: 128). She suggested that this sculptural virtuosity was matched only by a carving from Chocóla (Prater 1989: fig. 6.5) and the carved bones from Chiapa de Corzo (Agrinier 1960).⁴⁷ Even Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (fig. 3.8), which incorporated more carving planes but integrated them less successfully and included less attention to textured detail and fluidity of line, was classified by Prater (1989: 128–129) as stylistically distinct from Kaminaljuyu Stela 10. Moreover, according to Prater (1989: 130–131), the carving style of Izapa Stela 2 (fig. 3.2) stood in even greater contrast, as it utilized only two carving planes in most cases, and very little incised detailing to indicate texture, while exhibiting an angular quality and lack of fluidity to the rendering of forms, particularly the human body. As she further noted, many of the Izapa compositions were adapted to fit the natural contours of the stones, unlike much of the Kaminaljuyu imagery that was placed on stones whose shapes had been more extensively modified and regularized.

While Prater's analysis is invaluable for the detailed formal descriptions of Kaminaljuyu Stelae 10 and 11 and Izapa Stela 2, it ultimately addressed *only* the aspect of style, paying very little heed to other art historical indicators of interaction and influence such as iconography. Prater (1989: 12) defended this position, stressing that style was a more sensitive measure of cultural continuity than iconography and alluding to the theories of disjunction in Mesoamerican art as articulated by Kubler (1973). Despite Prater's refreshing sensitivity to subtle variations in style, which was certainly critical to understanding the complex relationships between key Late Preclassic south-eastern Mesoamerican sites, her analysis failed to account adequately for the motifs, themes, and narratives that *were* shared. In fact, she only grudgingly acknowledged the possible existence of an Izapan "horizon style" that encompassed the Guatemalan Highlands and Pacific Coast and piedmont and which, as Miles (1965) and Parsons (1967) before her had suggested, incorporated a range of formal variation (Prater 1989: 125).

THE 1990S THROUGH THE PRESENT

The last decade of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first were characterized by a diverse range of studies concerning Izapa and its place within the canon of Mesoamerican art. While the majority concentrated on the rich narrative content and iconographic repertoire of the Izapa monuments, other studies, like that by Flora Clancy (1990), offered an innovative analysis of the "genealogy" or developmental trajectory of the stela form, so ubiquitous at Izapa and elsewhere during the Late Preclassic period. As she noted, the stela, which became the primary sculptural form during the Late Preclassic and Classic periods, was well suited to accommodate increasingly complex narrative scenes like those at Izapa. Although Clancy (1990: 27) deferred to other scholars' (Prater 1989; Smith 1984) assessments of the Izapan style phenomenon as limited in scope and influence, she inferred that the extensive utilization of the stela form at Izapa was a critical part of the Late Preclassic development of "a major solution for the Classic requirements of public monuments" (Clancy 1990: 27). Such a suggestion moved away from discussions of the purely stylistic or iconographic characteristics of Izapan style stelae and considered instead the sculptural form itself as an indicator of broadly shared solutions to the presentation of public discourse.

Beatriz Barba de Piña Chan's (1990, 1993) studies, on the other hand, sought to identify the content of this public discourse. In order to do this, she applied the myths recorded in the Postclassic K'iche' Maya creation story, the *Popol Vuh*, to many of the stela scenes at Izapa. Although other scholars (Cortez 1986; Norman 1976) had already successfully employed the *Popol Vuh* to elucidate imagery at Izapa, Barba de Piña Chan offered several new and significant insights.⁴⁸ However, where narratives from the *Popol Vuh* could not be applied to explicate the imagery at Izapa, she borrowed freely from central Mexican ethnohistoric narratives (Barba de Piña Chan 1990: 113–166; 1993), falling into the same pit-

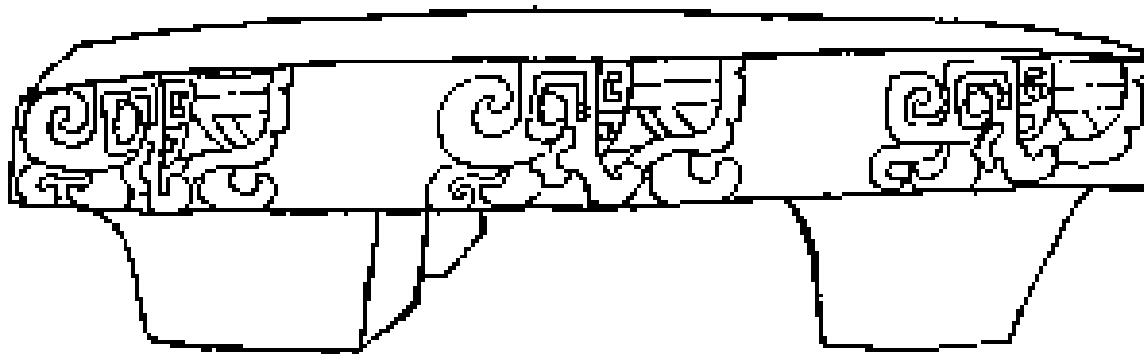


Figure 3.18. Izapa Throne I. Drawing by author.

falls of geographic disjunction that had plagued aspects of Norman's (1976) work.

Moving away from the traditional concentration on stelae, Jonathan Kaplan (1995) embarked on an innovative discussion of thrones and their associated imagery at Late Preclassic sites in south-eastern Mesoamerica. Kaplan addressed the strikingly consistent forms and recurring iconography that characterized thrones at Izapa (fig. 3.18) and Kaminaljuyu and that pointed to a shared Late Preclassic communication sphere. Kaplan (1995: 194) also posited that such key iconographic patterns can, and should, be used by scholars in conjunction with the archaeological record to discern information about political ideology, worldview, and sociopolitical organization.⁴⁹ As Kaplan astutely discerned, throne iconography, especially when considered vis-à-vis the rulers seated in association with it, was part of a larger formal vocabulary that sought to define the politically and supernaturally privileged role of rulers within Late Preclassic society (Kaplan 1995: 192).⁵⁰

The narrative content of Izapa monuments was the focus of a dissertation written in 1997 by Timothy Laughton. While Laughton echoed the work of many earlier scholars in his application of the *Popol Vuh* to explicate much of the imagery at Izapa, he combined this approach with a contextual examination of the monuments in relationship to one another. He also, like Norman (1976) before him, employed extensive astronomical data in order to suggest new interpretations of the narratives recorded on—and shared between—monuments at the site, as well as to offer a more refined

date for their execution. Although the details of Laughton's arguments warrant debate, his use of astronomical alignments to link monuments from various groups into extended narrative sequences was painstakingly rendered and provocative.

Laughton's analysis also expanded upon Quirarte's (1973, 1974) earlier discussion of the top and basal bands typically incorporated into stela compositions at Izapa.⁵¹ For instance, he suggested that the basal panel on Izapa Stela 5 was a toponymic reference to specific geographic features visible at the site (Laughton 1997: 189).⁵² Likewise, he commented at length on the novelty of the top framing band on Izapa stelae, which was seldom incorporated into stela compositions outside of Izapa, and which functioned as more than a mere decorative device. Rather, he posited, they served as "thresholds" that delineated between the natural and supernatural realms (cf. Clancy 1990). Laughton (1997: 74), in fact, carried this to an extreme, suggesting that the bands explicitly defined the interior imagery as supernatural or mythic, and not the stuff of history. This argument, particularly in light of those by Proskouriakoff (1971), Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982), and Cortez (1986) to the contrary, lacks support. A more reasonable understanding of the role of the framing bands, which were clearly critical to the presentation of discourse at Izapa and elsewhere, rests on their formal and symbolic function in differentiating between simple rock surface and sacred space. This more conservative—yet encompassing—definition acknowledges the important role that the framing bands played within Izapan



Figure 3.19. Izapa Miscellaneous Monuments 5–10 in Group B symbolizing the “Three Stones of Creation.” Photo by author.

style compositions, yet does not relegate the imagery contained within them to the realm of esoteria.⁵³ Interestingly, although Laughton (1997: 37, 91, 227) interpreted the bulk of Izapa imagery as mythological or religious in nature and almost exclusively ahistorical, he nonetheless acknowledged that such imagery was employed for political gain by rulers at the site.

In the dissertation that provided the foundation for the present study, I (1997) took a significantly different stance from Laughton. Following the lead of earlier scholars (Cortez 1986; Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982; Proskouriakoff 1971), I identified a series of monuments at Izapa whose narratives spoke directly to the institution of rulership and the role of rulers during the Late Preclassic period. The dissertation also addressed the overtly political themes of many of the Izapa monuments and linked them to greater mythic schemes that provided a conceptual foundation for the articulation of rulership during this period.

Additionally, as will be developed more fully in the present study, I related this politically charged imagery to monuments at other sites that were participating, along with Izapa, in a dynamic Late Preclassic communication sphere.

The role of Izapan monuments in giving voice to the ways in which rulership was performed during the Late Preclassic period was also addressed by Karl Taube (1998). Focusing on the theme of centrality, Taube pointed to architectural and sculptural arrangements (fig. 3.19), stela imagery, and archaeological evidence at Izapa that demonstrated the kinds of powerful metaphors invoked by Late Preclassic rulers in order to denote their role within the Mesoamerican universe. His study, like others before it, was significant for its emphasis on the historical implications of Izapa monuments, and its application of a multidisciplinary methodology that borrowed from art history, anthropology, archaeology, and epigraphy.

Lastly, recent excavations at Izapa under the

direction of Hernando Gómez Rueda (1995, 1996) resulted in the discovery of over two dozen new monuments at the site (cf. Gómez Rueda and Grazioso Sierra 1997). In conjunction with this project, Grazioso Sierra (2002: 244) readdressed the utility of models of stylistic seriation like those proposed by Miles (1965) and Parsons (1986) for Izapan style monuments. As she correctly noted, significant stylistic variation exists even among monuments at Izapa alone, such as alternative basal panel compositions or the presence/absence of incised designs. This can—and should—be accounted for, she posited, by the sheer length of the Guillen phase, which spanned a period of 250 years. Even if all Izapa monuments were carved during this single phase, as the archaeological evidence suggests (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982), Grazioso noted that it would have encompassed the reigns of six to seven generations of leaders; this fact alone would account for a certain amount of formal variation and make any kind of stylistic seriation problematic at best. Perhaps most significantly, Grazioso's analysis shifted discussions of style from the greater "Izapan style" sphere to that of the site of Izapa alone, and demonstrated the careful attention that must be paid to internal, site-specific variations and the information they carry.

THE IZAPAN STYLE: A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY VANTAGE POINT

With the distinct advantage that hindsight provides, it is productive to look back on the scholarship over the last seven decades and acknowledge the extraordinary progress that has been made toward understanding the pivotal role that Izapa, and monuments carved in the Izapan style, played on the stage of Mesoamerican history. Despite some lingering objections to the contrary, most scholars agree that Izapan style art provides a lens through which one can view the ways in which rulership was presented during the Late Preclassic period. Such an assertion, however, rests on two assumptions. First, it presumes that a significant component of the art was historical in nature,

rather than purely mythic or religious, an argument that traces its origins to the pioneering work of Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1971). This situation, obviously, is hampered by the almost complete lack of hieroglyphic inscriptions that, by contrast, provide such important historical specificity to Classic Maya art. The view taken here, however, is that vehicles other than hieroglyphic writing, such as recurring narratives, repeating vocabularies of forms, overlapping stylistic sensibilities, and consistently invoked mythological references—all of which are found in abundance in Izapan style art—attest to the need of Late Preclassic rulers to articulate coherent strategies of authority. In other words, the priority that is given to epigraphic evidence with regards to Classic-period monuments cannot be sustained in analyses of Late Preclassic art, nor does it need to be: the rich archaeological and visual record of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica speaks volumes despite its lack of hieroglyphic inscriptions.

Second, it rests on the assumption that the Izapan style did indeed represent more than a unique sculptural phenomenon at the site of Izapa. It also assumes that the Izapan style manifestation was widely—and deliberately—shared throughout the Late Preclassic period by numerous elites operating within a communication sphere that stretched throughout southeastern Mesoamerica, encompassing the Pacific coastal piedmont, the Guatemalan Highlands, and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and extending into the Olmec heartland. This supposition, interestingly enough, dates back to the early observations of Stirling (1943) and Thompson (1943, 1948), who immediately recognized the recurring patterns and forms that characterize monuments throughout these regions. Although various voices have raised doubt about the coherence and validity of an "Izapan style manifestation," the striking commonalities in both style and content of monuments found throughout southeastern Mesoamerica are undeniable, and it remains particularly productive to consider the monuments as part of a widespread and historically specific network of interaction.

Nonetheless, the problem of ascertaining a rea-

sonably accurate definition for the Izapan style long plagued—and continues to pester—scholarship on Izapan style monuments. Fortunately, Clancy (1999: 13) provided an insightful perspective on this problem. She noted that, by the time art historians turned their attention to Mesoamerican art, “the careful (some would say fulsome) formal and stylistic analyses that were the focus of art historical studies in the 19th century” had been “replaced by iconographic and structural analyses and a greater interest in content.” Thus, by the time researchers turned their attention to Izapa in the 1930s, Mesoamerican scholarship had already established an investigative trajectory that emphasized symbolic content rather than carefully rendered, synchronic or diachronic definitions of style. Even the seriations of monuments by Miles (1965) and Parsons (1986) and the formal critiques of Smith (1984) and Prater (1989) failed to take into consideration the stylistic variation that could exist between coeval sites, which may have been part of carefully regulated canons that subtly conveyed unique identities, ethnicities, or affiliations. As Schapiro (1953) and Sackett (1990) both eloquently demonstrated, stylistic analysis can be productively employed to determine not only overarching patterns of style that characterize temporal periods—such as the Late Preclassic in southeastern Mesoamerica in this case—but also the degrees of variation and innovation within a definable stylistic canon that function as expressions of a particular site’s unique identity. In other words, to apply their models to the present discussion, while some aspects of a greater Late Preclassic Izapan style may have been freely shared between sites and regions, other aspects appear to have been employed or ignored according to each site’s unique aesthetic sensibilities or deeply engrained stylistic code of self-identity.

An alternative, yet compatible, approach to this problem is that utilized by Clancy (1999: 19–21, 137 n. 12), who adopted Ernst Kitzinger’s (1977) model for Byzantine art that addressed the differing modes (or stylistic “events”) that could take place within larger, more encompassing styles (or stylistic units). Following such an approach, the greater Izapan style, speaking in broad terms, is

characterized typically by the use of ground lines, curling volutes, asymmetrical images that imply movement or gesture, fluid execution of line, a predominance of curvilinear forms, a strong awareness of pictorial fields and their limits, and an attention to overall compositional balance between foreground and background on stones that, although shaped by humans, still retain their natural contours. Despite these consistencies, however, monuments within this greater style category also frequently exhibit markedly different modes or stylistic “events,” such as a striking variation in the number of carving planes employed, the occasional use of incision to express details such as texture and volume, and variation in the precision or refinement of the execution of line.⁵⁴ These idiosyncrasies sometimes occur *between* sites, which supports the contention that stylistic variation may have been employed by artists at each site to promote notions of self/site-identity or cultural affiliation. They might also be attributed to established scribal conventions at each respective location. While little work has been done to define specific scribal “schools” or “hands” working at particular Late Preclassic sites, much has been done to better understand this phenomenon during the ensuing Classic Maya period.⁵⁵

Yet, despite the likelihood that all of these circumstances undoubtedly contributed to the contrasting stylistic modes at various sites, none of them accounts completely for the variability that also occurs *within* the sculptural corpus of any one site (cf. Grazioso Sierra 2002; Prater 1989). Such variation within a specific site’s corpus not only attests to the complexity of defining stylistic parameters, but speaks to the freedom with which Late Preclassic artists—and their patrons—approached notions of style. It also undoubtedly testifies to the extended time span during which many of these monuments were carved at any given site. However, as Grazioso Sierra (2002: 244) cautioned, determining specific moments of stylistic change, or a directional flow for these forces, is fraught with difficulties. Moreover, such limitations are inherent to any material that defies precise dating, as is the case at Izapa where the sculpture does not carry any dates.

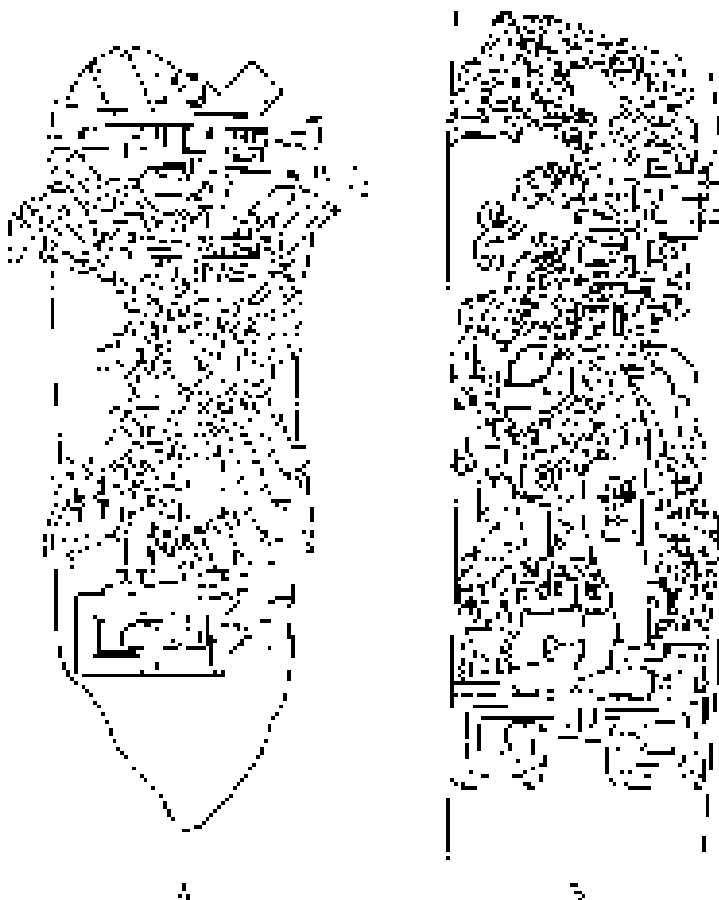


Figure 3.20. A comparison of style and iconography: A, Izapa Stela 4; B, Kaminaljuyu Stela 11. Drawings by Ajax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

A comparison between Izapa Stela 4 and Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (fig. 3.20) illustrates some of these points, and also demonstrates the need for scholars to be vigilant in differentiating between “style” and “iconography,” these two discrete categories whose marriage fully manifests any meaning. At first glance, Izapa Stela 4 and Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 bear striking formal similarities, such as the use of ground lines and asymmetrical compositions that imply movement. Yet, each monument also illustrates unique stylistic modes, such as the use of multiple, distinct carving planes on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 versus the division between only frontal relief plane and background on Izapa Stela 4 (Prater 1989: 128–131). Different, too, is the Kaminaljuyu artist’s use of incised design to denote texture, as on the stone ax wielded by the protagonist, a formal characteristic that is not rep-

resented within the corpus of monuments at Izapa, and that clearly contributes to the legibility of the scene on Stela 11 (Parsons 1967: 184, 1986: 49; Prater 1989: 131). These stylistic variations were nonetheless incorporated into an iconographic scheme that bears remarkable consistency, from the protagonists costumed as birds down to such details as the in-turning ground lines and avian headdresses worn by the actors.

Such a simple example aptly demonstrates that notions of “style” and “iconography” must be addressed as very powerful yet independent criteria that pose their own unique pitfalls concerning questions of influence and ethnic affiliation. Izapa Stela 4 and Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 cohere as a meaningful set in general stylistic terms—despite variations in mode—as well as in iconographic terms. The problem, really, is with the designation “Izapan style.” First, it contains the loaded word “style,” which was applied haphazardly to address a range of criteria—both stylistic and iconographic—for over seven decades. Second, it includes the name “Izapa,” which suggests a static point of origin irreconcilable with broader archaeological, stylistic, and iconographic evidence.

Nevertheless, despite the variation that exists between monuments grouped under the rubric “Izapan style”—and despite the irrefutable fact that the term has been used inconsistently throughout the history of the literature—it is the premise of this study that, at a very fundamental level, it is a useful expression. Both formally and symbolically, Izapan style monuments do indeed form a coherent corpus that speaks to the many ways in which rulership and its conventions of representation were shared during the Late Preclassic period in southeastern Mesoamerica.⁵⁶ Its advantages also outweigh its disadvantages, as the term—however loose—enables scholars to begin slowly piecing together an understanding of Late Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerican sculptural canons and objectives.⁵⁷

This discussion of style, admittedly, is an art historical one, and contrasts with different and more encompassing notions of style that are found, for instance, in the archaeological litera-

ture.⁵⁸ Often, in such cases, the term style subsumes a method of analysis, such as iconography, that is considered distinct from a purely art historical definition of style. In other cases, the term style is applied to a suite of cultural remains or patterns of material culture, and discussed in terms of identity and social interaction (cf. Childe 1956; Conkey 1990; Hodder 1982, 1990; Sackett 1990). These approaches, although different from the one taken here, provide alternative ways in which to view the communication of an elite ideology across linguistic boundaries, which is, in essence, what Izapan style monuments achieved. The adoption of a conception of style based on an art historical approach, like the one offered in this study, treats style as a powerful tool for communication between groups (cf. Schapiro 1953), yet differentiates between formal characteristics and iconography, thereby providing a means for independently exploring these distinct expressive means and their application by ruling elites during the Late Preclassic period.

The situation, then, although complex and challenging, overwhelmingly reveals the sophistication of the Late Preclassic Izapan style phenomenon, which was anything but “formative.” It also provides a unique opportunity to discern patterns

of continuity in the formal expression of numerous themes, including rulership, myth, cosmogenesis, religion, and social history. By incorporating a broad notion of “Izapan style” that considers not only a vocabulary of forms but also their implications, light can be shed on the intricate relationship between mechanisms for communication and their messages. The patterns of continuity—or variation, for that matter—in turn enable us to reconstruct a Late Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerican worldview that was communicated and monumentalized through the sculptural record at numerous sites.

As will be explored throughout the remainder of this study, a recurring set of images, in which rulers enact rituals in the costume of a bird, appears on monuments scattered throughout the Izapan style sphere. More than a demonstration of shared iconography and stylistic conventions, these monuments provide a powerful vehicle through which messages of kingly authority and its mythological underpinnings were phrased during this traditionally neglected time period in Mesoamerican history. Perhaps even more importantly, such an analysis gives primacy to the imagery, while simultaneously revealing the actors and performances behind the sculpted forms.

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PART OF A CONTINUUM

Supernatural Communication in Late Preclassic Izapan Style Art

It is as builders that political elites may be most dramatically or visibly seen to impose ordered form on the social and natural landscape, as establishing access to and controlling and transforming the powers of the cosmological realm outside by symbolic and technical knowledge, as realizing aesthetic ideals associated with both skilled crafting and the proper expression of leadership and government, and as literally associating themselves, as master creator-crafters, with ancestral creative powers as these are expressed in places and actions of origins and of new beginnings.

—Helms 1993

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking motifs in the corpus of stelae from Izapa is a winged or flying figure. Walking through the courtyard of Izapa Group A (fig. 4.1) during the Late Preclassic period, for instance, one would have been confronted on more than one occasion by the visage of an individual peering out from under an enormous bird head-dress, with arms stretched diagonally outward, weighted with decorative wings. Although rendered in stone, the dynamic postures of these enigmatic avian-costumed figures suggest movement and performance, as if permanently engaged in an ongoing ritual cycle.

While these recurring images of winged figures are but one of many narratives that were monumentalized in the sculptural record of Izapa, it is the premise of this study that they provide especially vivid insight into a number of important issues. First, they portray, in rich narrative detail, one type of performance that was staged in Late Preclassic site centers. Second, they articulate potent messages of political, cosmological, and

mythological authority. Third, they are linked to a specific pattern of ritual behavior that was performed with great consistency throughout a broad geographic region during the Late Preclassic period. Perhaps most importantly, however, they provide a window onto the past through which one can explore the foundations for rulership during the Late Preclassic period and its expression through the medium of stone sculpture.

This chapter places these images of winged performers within a continuum of Mesoamerican belief that stretched from the Preclassic through the Classic periods. Although it begins by briefly examining Izapan style representations of bird-costumed individuals, it quickly turns to an exploration of Middle Preclassic antecedents for this imagery, paying particular attention to shamanic models that have been used to explicate these complex scenes of supernatural communication. The chapter continues by contrasting these shamanic models, which dominate scholarship on the Middle Preclassic period, to those developed for the Classic Maya period. While few doubt that Classic Maya kingship also emphasized supernat-

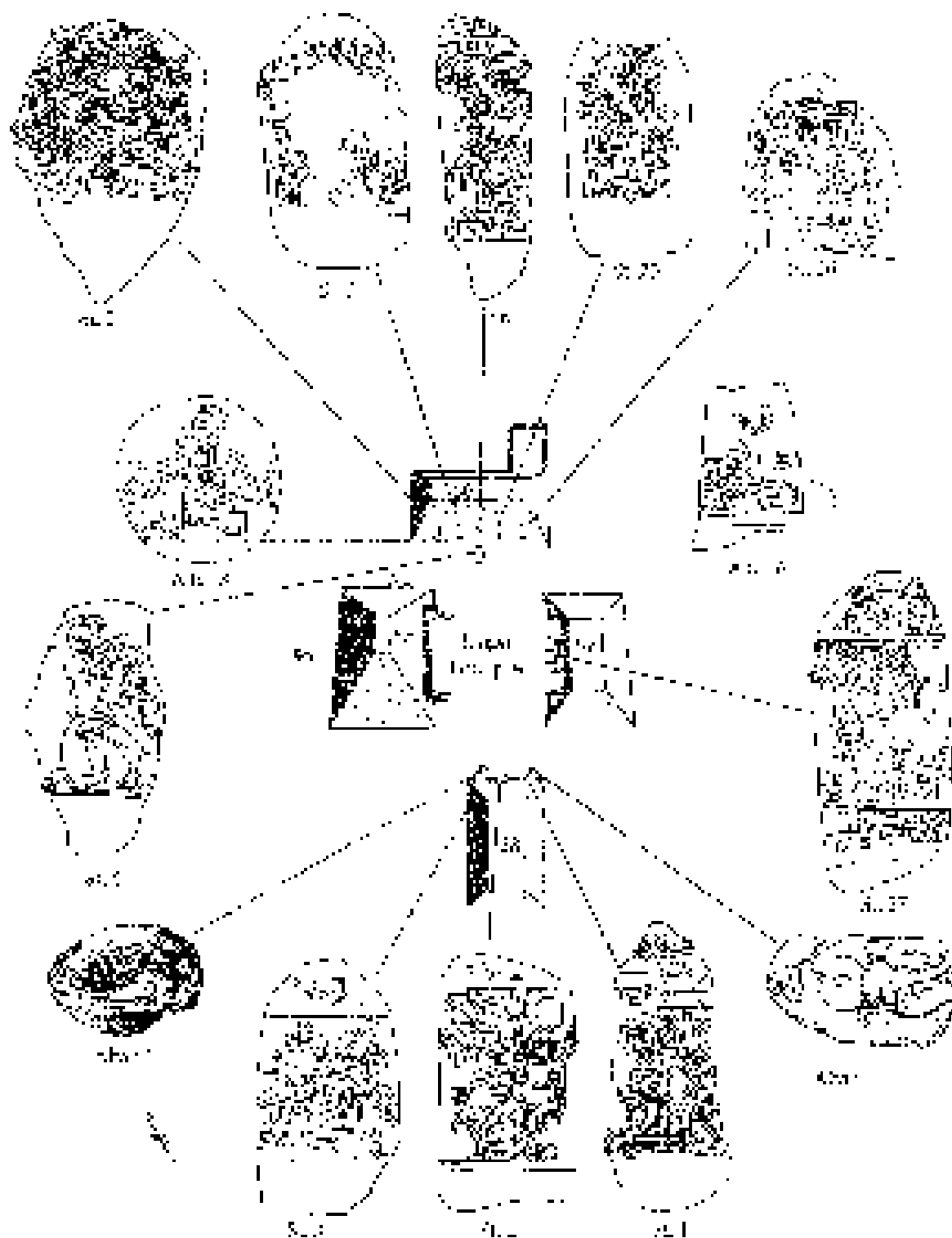


Figure 4.1. Schematic rendering of Group A at Izapa, showing location of major monuments. Drawing by author after Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: Fig. 8.1.

ural contact as a prerequisite for political control, the insight provided by hieroglyphic inscriptions—some of which record the actual phrasing used by the Classic Maya to express notions of supernatural communication—enables a more nuanced understanding of these concepts. Late Preclassic Izapan style imagery, then, provides a temporal midpoint between these two interpretive extremes, one that emphasizes a shamanic belief system as a basis for political power during the Middle Preclassic period, and the other that incorporates hieroglyphic data to understand Classic Maya notions of deity impersonation and divine contact. Although the limited corpus of monuments and dearth of hieroglyphic evidence may preclude a complete understanding of the nature of supernatural contact during the Late Preclassic period, the monuments—and particularly those that feature avian performers—attest to the importance of divine communication as a recurring theme within expressions of rulership. In fact, the imagery must be recognized as a compelling record of ideas and beliefs that merits attention and was part of a greater Mesoamerican worldview in which rulers buttressed claims to authority by demonstrating their abilities to commune with the supernatural realm of ancestors and deities.

AVIAN IMAGERY AT IZAPA

During the Late Preclassic period, imagery of avian performance is perhaps best illustrated by Izapa Stela 4 (fig. 4.2), which depicts two figures costumed as birds. Stela 4 stood at the apex of a group of monuments at the base of Mound 56, which formed the northern boundary of the quadrilateral plaza of Group A and provided a focal point for the organization of the other monuments within the courtyard (cf. Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 158). On Stela 4, one of the winged figures is planted firmly on the basal band of the stela, while the other hovers head down in the air above. The lower figure waves an axlike object in his left hand and grasps another similar object in his right. From his forearms dangle long feathers attached with large knots to his wrists

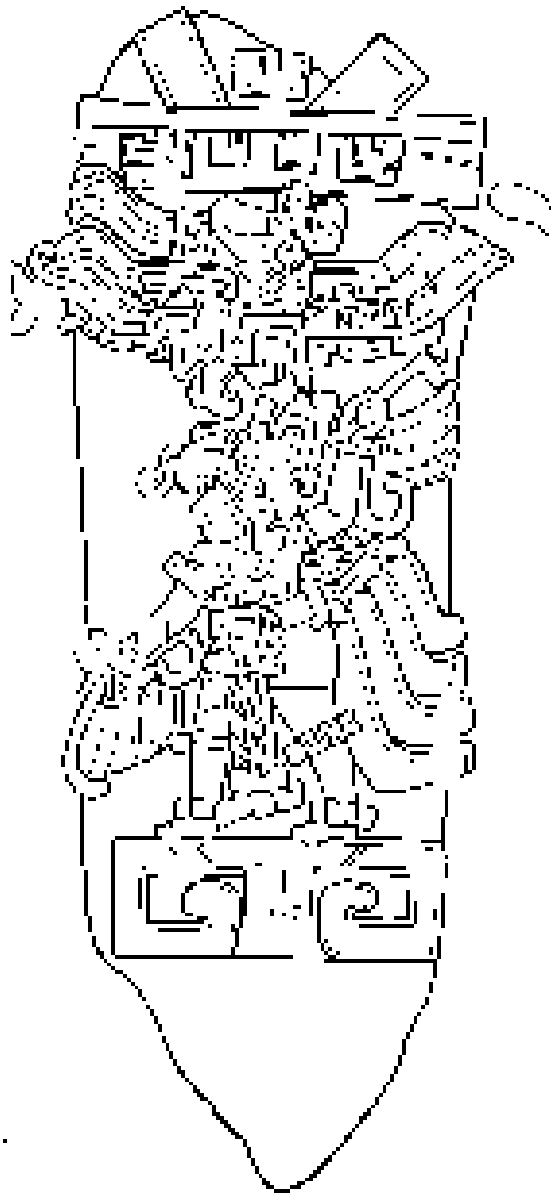


Figure 4.2. Izapa Stela 4. Drawing by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

while feathers also project out from behind him, attached to a frame that contains crossed bands. In addition, he wears a long-beaked headdress that is distinctly birdlike. His posture, with arms askew and feet spread widely apart, is very active and clearly conveys movement.¹

Above him hovers a second winged figure that descends from an upper framing band. This individual wears a beaked headdress that compares closely to that of his counterpart below. The flying

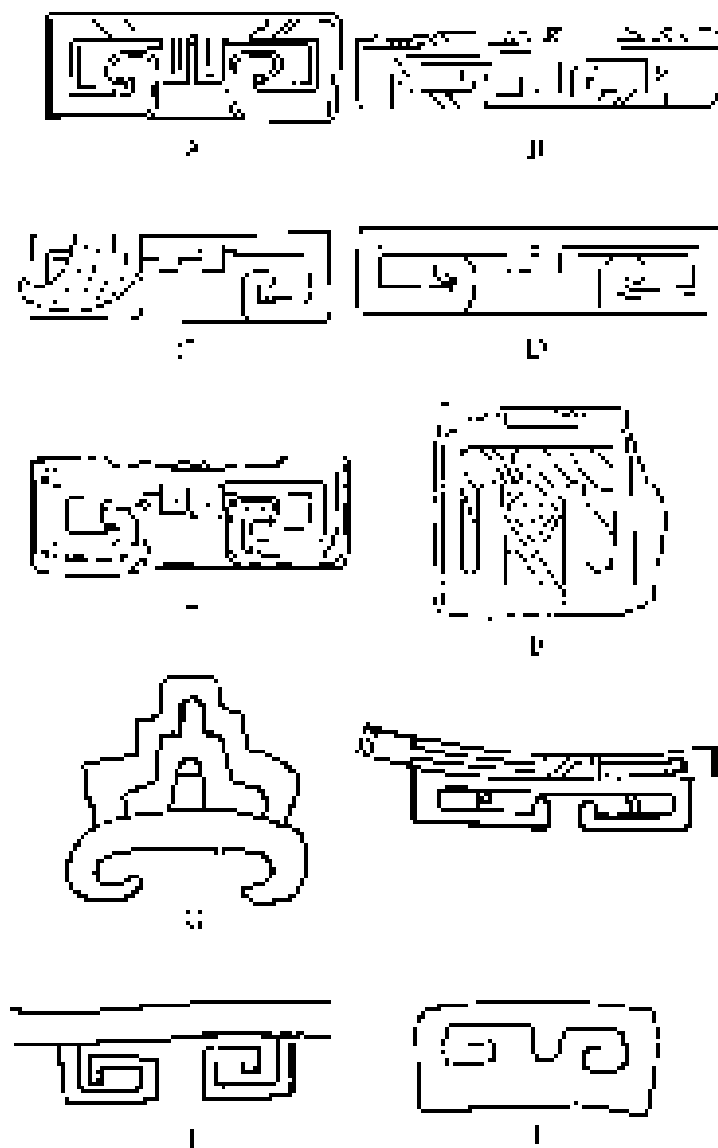


Figure 4.3. Comparison of basal bands on Middle and Late Preclassic monuments: A, Izapa Stela 4; B, Izapa Stela 18; C, Izapa Altar 3; D, Izapa Altar 20; E, Kaminaljuyu Stela 11; F, Chalcatzingo Stela 21; G, Dallas plaque; H, Chalcatzingo Vase; I, Los Mangos, Catemaco Monument 1; J, Detail of a glyph from La Mojarra Stela 1. Drawings by Ajax Moreno, Linda Schele, F. Kent Reilly III, and the author.

figure also bears ornate wings that attach to his torso without the aid of arms. In fact, it appears that this second figure possesses the body of a bird, replete with wings, despite the markedly anthropomorphic profile that peaks through the beaked headdress. Echoing this distinctly avian sensibility are the flying figure's toes, which curl into talons

despite their placement at the end of very human-looking legs. In essence, the figure represents an avian-anthropomorphic composite, depicted in the act of descending toward the human figure below.

The relative placement of these two figures is important to consider. For example, the lower winged figure on Stela 4 stands on a basal band that curls inward (fig. 4.3A). A nearly identical basal band appears on other monuments at Izapa, such as Stela 18 and Altars 3 and 20, as well as on Late Preclassic monuments from different sites, such as Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (fig. 4.3B–E). Importantly, this characteristic in-turning basal panel makes its first appearance not during the Late Preclassic, but during the preceding Middle Preclassic period in the Otomanguean-speaking highlands of Mexico on sculpture such as Chalcatzingo Monument 21 (fig. 4.3F) and the small stela from San Miguel Amuco, Guerrero (Grove 2000: 6–7; Reilly 1994: 269).² A similar in-turning ground line also appears on the Middle Preclassic Dallas Plaque (fig. 4.3G), where it forms the base of a pyramidal composition, and on the Chalcatzingo Vase (fig. 4.3H) where it marks the bottom of an open bundle. During the Middle Preclassic period, it consistently underscores the base of objects or scenes, as if denoting a terrestrial level. By the end of the Middle Preclassic period, the motif also appears on sculpture in the Gulf Coast Olmec heartland region, as on Los Mangos, Catemaco Monument 1 (fig. 4.3I), where it likewise functions as a terrestrial marker.

During the Late Preclassic period, the symbol of an in-turning ground line was not only incorporated into compositions at sites such as Izapa and Kaminaljuyu, but also appears in the hieroglyphic text of La Mojarra Stela 1, a monument from Veracruz that dates to circa AD 150. Independently, Stross and Reilly (1991) and Justeson and Kaufman (1993) suggested that this symbol represents the syllable *na* and functions iconically as “earth” (fig. 4.3J). If this interpretation of the symbol's meaning within the text of La Mojarra Stela 1 is correct, it suggests that the sign bore considerable continuity throughout a large region during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods.³ Accordingly, on Izapa

Stela 4 as elsewhere during the Preclassic period, the basal motif appears to signify the terrestrial realm, firmly anchoring the performance of the individual standing upon it to the earth.

In contrast, the flying figure that descends from the horizontal band at the top of the stela corresponds to a well-established Preclassic tradition of celestial iconography. Stirling (1943: 62) was the first to liken these upper framing bands at Izapa to the upper jaws of jaguars. As Norman (1976: 23) and Quirarte (1973: 17) elaborated, there are distinct similarities between the top, somewhat abstract, framing bands at Izapa and the upper compositional panel on La Venta Altar 4, which depicts the open maw of a jaguar (fig. 4.4A and B).⁴ As they further observed, the sky bands at Izapa move beyond purely jaguarian references and incorporate serpentine attributes as well, as in the case of the upper framing band on Izapa Stela 23 (fig. 4.4C).

Taube (1995: 93–94) expanded upon this suggestion, tracing the antecedents of these sky bands back into the Middle Preclassic period and identifying an iconographic repertoire that referenced the overarching sky (cf. Coe 1977: 189). As he noted, symbolism such as this not only facilitated the organization of the picture plane, but also spoke to the “interaction and junctures among the sky, earth, and underworld” in an ancient Mesoamerican worldview (Taube 1995: 94). The significance of this symbol system was not lost upon the Late Preclassic Maya, who incorporated strikingly similar celestial markers at sites like Tikal, as on the outer walls of Structure 5D-Sub-10-1st (fig. 4.4D) (Quirarte 1976: 77; Schele and Freidel 1990: 132).

The anchoring of the lower figure to the terrestrial band on Izapa Stela 4, then, clearly defines his performance as one that occurred in this world, and stands in marked contrast to the position of the flying figure above who descends from a celestial band. Although both wear almost identical bird costumes, the lower figure is purely anthropomorphic while the upper figure combines both anthropomorphic and avian traits. Based on the organization of the picture plane and its distinctly

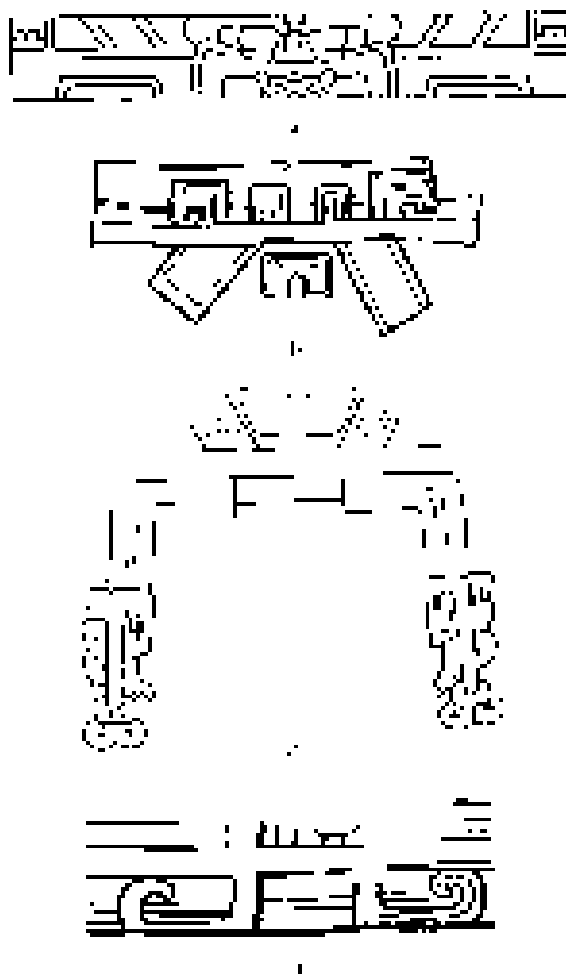


Figure 4.4. Comparison of celestial framing bands in the Olmec, Izapan, and Maya regions: A, La Venta Altar 4; B, Izapa Stela 4; C, Izapa Stela 23; D, Tikal Structure 5D-Sub-10-1st. Drawings by F. Kent Reilly III, Ayax Moreno, and Linda Schele.

narrative sensibility, it seems reasonable to explore the possibility that Izapa Stela 4 represents a scene of ritual transformation expressed as a simultaneous vision: below, the protagonist performs in the costume of a bird in the earthly realm, while above he appears transformed into his avian counterpart, engaged in an act of supernatural flight. Before considering the evidence for and implications of this interpretation, which is the subject of Chapter 5, it is important to consider both the long history of avian imagery within the corpus of Mesoamerican art and the complicated conceptual framework that sustained a pictorial tradition of transformation and supernatural travel.

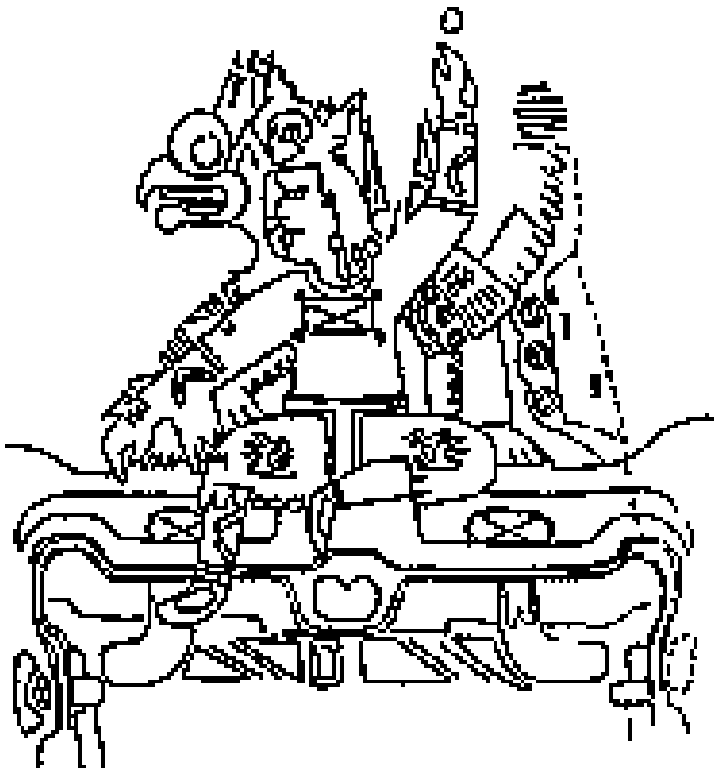


Figure 4.5. Oxtotitlan Mural 1. Drawing by F. Kent Reilly III.

MIDDLE PRECLASSIC ANTECEDENTS AND THE SHAMANIC MODEL

Late Preclassic representations of individuals costumed as birds trace their origins to an important set of Middle Preclassic images.⁵ Oxtotitlan Mural 1, painted on a cliff face above a cave in Guerrero, Mexico, depicts an individual in an elaborate bird costume (fig. 4.5; also see fig. 2.17).⁶ He wears a beaked headdress through which his face is visible (Grove 1970: 9), a technique that Reilly (1994) argued was deliberately used to signal to viewers that the image represented a human garbed as a bird rather than a zoomorphic supernatural. Grove (1970: 9) identified the mask as that of an owl, a nocturnal bird that functioned as a messenger between the supernatural realm and human beings for many Mesoamerican groups (Miller and Taube 1993: 128). Feathers, painted in hues of yellow, red, blue, and green, dangle beneath the arms of the figure

and appear to be part of a feathered cape that simulated wings.⁷

At Oxtotitlan, the figure is seated upon a throne that is composed of a partial quatrefoil arrangement of zoomorphic faces.⁸ The eyes of the top face, marked with crossed bands, are visible on either side of the protagonist's knees, while the eyes of the two adjacent masks, oriented at a ninety-degree angle and also marked by crossed bands, can be discerned below (Reilly 1995: 40). In its entirety, this zoomorphic throne symbolized a metaphoric portal that was located immediately above the cave entrance, itself a physical portal (Grove 1970: 31; Reilly 1994, 1995: 40–41). Placed as it was, high on the cliff face, the imagery of Oxtotitlan Mural 1 thus depicted an individual seated upon a celestial throne, engaged in supernatural communication through a cosmic portal symbolized by the quatrefoil opening and the actual cave entrance beneath.

As Reilly (1994, 1995: 41–42) and Grove and Gillespie (1992: 26) argued, imagery such as this comprised a Middle Preclassic iconographic system of supernatural access in which rulers were featured as individuals who could activate and control communication with the Otherworld. At Oxtotitlan, this supernatural communication was visualized through the metaphor of flight and reinforced by the context of the painting high on the cliff wall. The position of the ruler, with one arm raised and the other lowered, parallels that of Izapa Stela 4 and denotes movement, while the cape behind him reflects this activity and flares out in response to his gestures.⁹ The mural effectively creates a dynamic vision of ritual in which a ruler engages in a performance of flight meant to connote his ability to communicate with the supernatural sphere.

Mural 1 at Oxtotitlan may have been the living record of a publicly staged performance; at the very least, it appears to be the visual vestige of an ideology that mandated supernatural sanctification as a basis for authority.¹⁰ Equally importantly, the ramifications of the ruler's supernatural journey were dramatically manifested each year at the arrival of the rainy season. Grove (1970: 31)

recorded that, with the arrival of the rains, the cave beneath the painting occasionally overflowed with water that cascaded onto the fields below. This effect, in conjunction with the imagery and its location, conveyed a powerful message. It placed the ruler, both figuratively and contextually, in control of agricultural fertility: through his performance and contact with the supernatural, he controlled the arrival of the rains and, by extension, the continued agricultural bounty of the lands. This message would have been particularly powerful in this region of Guerrero, where the well-being of communities depended in great part on the arrival of seasonal rains. With the advent of the rainy season, the imagery and metaphor of Oxtotitlan Mural 1 became fact: rain did pour out of the cave at the bequest of the ruler.¹¹

La Venta Altar 4 (fig. 4.6; also see fig. 2.14) forges a similar connection between avian-costumed rulers and supernatural communication, albeit through an entirely different sculptural vehicle. The ruler depicted on Altar 4 wears a bird headdress, identified by Grove (1970) as that of the raptorial harpy eagle, and clasps in his hands a rope that attaches to the bound wrist of a figure on the right side of the altar.¹² The ruler is seated within a niche and rendered in powerfully three-dimensional form as if to convey his liminal position partly in, and partly outside of, the opening. Like the quatrefoil portal of Oxtotitlan Mural 1, the niche symbolized a cave or opening into the Otherworld and served to place the avian-costumed ruler within a cosmically charged space.¹³ The open maw of the jaguar, which loomed above the niche, underscored its role as a cosmic portal.

Research by Grove (1973) demonstrated that objects such as La Venta Altar 4 actually functioned within the sacred landscape as thrones, or seats of royal power. This reappraisal of Olmec altars as thrones also implies their public function as places where rulers made appearances in conjunction with various administrative and ritual activities. Moreover, the imagery in which an Olmec ruler clasps a twisted cord—or symbolic conduit—while seated within a cosmic portal, provides a glimpse into the

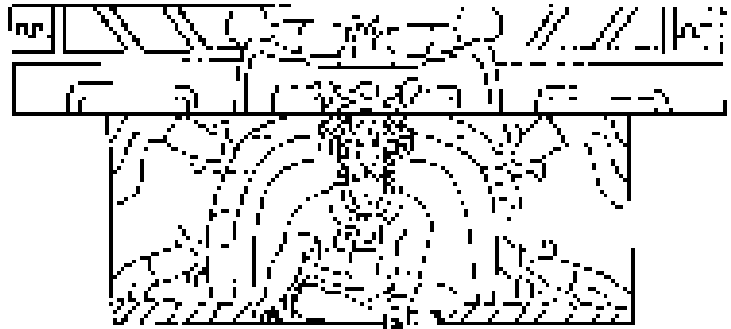


Figure 4.6. La Venta Altar 4. Drawing by F. Kent Reilly III.

types of performances that were staged for Middle Preclassic audiences. When La Venta Altar 4 and Oxtotitlan Mural 1 are considered together, the role that avian journeys—or rituals in which rulers garbed as birds proceeded to demonstrate their abilities to contact the supernatural realm—played in Middle Preclassic monumental artistic programs is made abundantly clear. These monuments illustrate that the public display of a ruler's ability to contact the supernatural realm was critical to expressions of authority, and that one metaphor through which this journey was expressed was flight.¹⁴ Imagery like that of La Venta Altar 4 and Oxtotitlan Mural 1 were more than mere records of publicly staged rituals, however. They are visual testimony to one of the ideological foundations for ancient Mesoamerican rulership, which was the ruler's ability to communicate with the Otherworld. It is important, at both La Venta and Oxtotitlan, that these messages of avian flight were phrased in conjunction with the depiction of thrones, which represented the physical seat of authority. Through the juxtaposition of throne and avian imagery, these works clearly communicated the conceptual overlap between authority and supernatural communication that characterized the Middle Preclassic period.¹⁵

Furst (1968) and Reilly (1989) also discussed the process of transformation that is portrayed on a series of Middle Preclassic figurines (fig. 4.7). A number of these Olmec statuettes, which average between ten to twenty centimeters in height and are attributed to a wide region that encompasses portions of modern Veracruz, Tabasco, and Chia-



Figure 4.7. Human-jaguar figurine. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Constance McCormick Fearing, photograph © 2005 Museum Associates/LACMA.

pas, depict individuals that appear to metamorphose from humans into jaguarian creatures.¹⁶ As both scholars noted, the various statuettes render this process of transformation along a continuum that ranges from primarily anthropomorphic to predominantly feline. Moreover, Furst (1968: 151) observed that some figurines, like the one illustrated in fig. 4.7, vividly portray this transformation as if “the human skin [had been] carved or peeled away to reveal the jaguar beneath.”

A figurine from the Middle Preclassic site of La Blanca, Guatemala, also appears to reference this process of transformation, yet does so in

human-avian terms. The ceramic figurine (fig. 4.8), approximately eight and a half centimeters in height and found in association with the principal mound at the site, portrays the lower torso and legs of a human topped by the long neck, head, and beak of a bird. This figurine, like contemporary Middle Preclassic images from Oxtotitlan and La Venta, suggests that the concept of human-avian transformation was shared by elites along the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica, and may have laid the foundations for related expressions of this theme during the ensuing Late Preclassic period. At any rate, the way in which the process of transformation was interpreted sculpturally both in the Olmec region and on the Pacific Coast—in composite visions that simultaneously capture both the human and animal nature of the individual—is especially important to consider in light of Late Preclassic imagery like that of Izapa Stela 4. Already by the Middle Preclassic period, a



Figure 4.8. La Blanca human-avian composite figurine. Photo by Michael Love.

system that visually rendered the process of transformation had been developed, forging the way for later imagery that would also strive to capture—in a legible, visual language of forms—this process of change and supernatural communication.¹⁷

Reilly (1994, 1995: 39–42) further contended that this Middle Preclassic imagery, which alluded to an individual's ability to communicate with the supernatural realm through jaguarian transformation or flight in the form of a bird, was one aspect of an “institutionalized shamanism” that incorporated the tenets of a shamanic belief system as an important ideological foundation for political power.¹⁸ Throughout the corpus of Olmec art are numerous images that depict Middle Preclassic rulers at the center of compositions, their bodies functioning as conduits that connected the terrestrial world to the celestial sphere. Reilly identified this imagery, primarily found on greenstone celts (fig. 4.9), as a depiction of rulers in their role as World Tree, or *axis mundi*, spanning the three levels of the universe: underworld, terrestrial, and celestial. Representations such as this also placed the ruler at the center point of a quincunx, thereby identifying him not only as a vertical conduit but also as the focal point of horizontal space, symbolized by the five-point cosmogram (Reilly 1994, 1995: 39). This portrayal of the ruler as an *axis mundi*, Reilly noted, corresponds closely to shamanic models of the universe and suggests that a Middle Preclassic Olmec cosmology, as envisioned in artifacts such as this, was fueled by a fundamentally shamanic belief system. This kind of Middle Formative Olmec shamanism, which Reilly (1994: 32, 1995: 30) referred to as “institutionalized,” was incorporated into complex, ranked societies that were undoubtedly in transition from chiefdoms to primitive states (cf. Coe and Diehl 1980: 392; Grove and Gillespie 1992). This “institutionalized shamanism” proposed by Reilly was not the shamanism of hunter-gatherers, but rather a form that resulted from the unique, historically specific circumstances of Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica, which integrated essentially shamanistic practices into a system of rulership that was predicated, at least in part, on a ruler's

ability to communicate directly with the supernatural.¹⁹

Reilly offered this interpretation despite the ongoing contention among modern scholars that surrounds the attribution of the origins of political power within complex societies to an ideological matrix based on shamanism.²⁰ As he observed, these problems stem from the difficulties in achieving a clear definition of shamanism and elucidating the structure of shamanic belief systems. Humphrey (1994: 192–193) also addressed this issue, and made an eloquent plea for scholars to reevaluate shamanism as a discourse, rather than as a static model. In her terms, such a methodology would allow scholars “to see shamanism as constitutive of social realities in contexts of power, and to anticipate, rather than be puzzled by, its multiplicities, contradictions, and changes of content, in different historical situations” (Humphrey 1994: 193).

Shamanism in the strictest sense is preeminently a religious phenomenon of Siberia and central Asia, although many of the magico-religious belief systems throughout North America, South America, Oceania, and elsewhere exhibit shamanic components. Although providing a comprehensive definition of shamanism is not the goal of this study, certain key aspects of a shamanic belief system merit particular attention, especially with regards to suggestions that Middle Preclassic rulership was predicated upon such convictions (cf. Grove and Gillespie 1992; Reilly 1994, 1995). Such a discussion is also necessary in order to address fully the formal and iconographic continuities that undeniably exist in the presentation of avian journeys throughout the artistic corpus of Middle and Late Preclassic Mesoamerica.

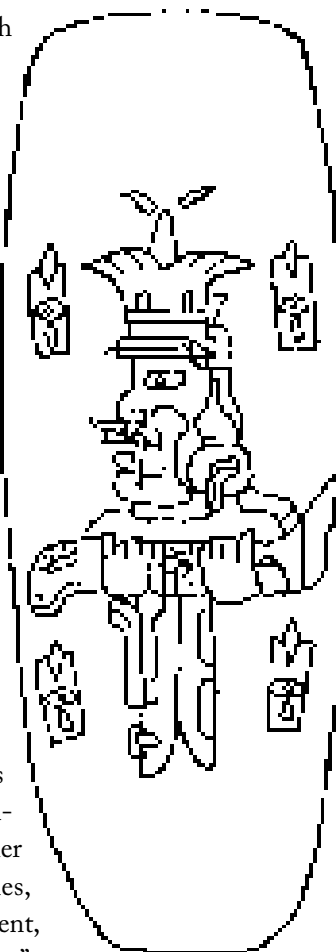


Figure 4.9. Celt from Río Pesquero. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

According to Eliade (1964), shamanism often is characterized by the technique of ecstasy, in which the soul of a shaman in a trance state leaves his body and travels into the supernatural realm. Critical to this transformation is the shaman's symbolic death, which allows him to return to a primordial time in which all human beings were able to ascend to heaven. For Eliade (1964: 143, 479), the shamanic experience was thus equivalent to the restoration of primordial, mythic time. Other critical tenets within a shamanic belief system as outlined by Eliade included magical flight, which emphasized a shaman's superhuman condition and visualized his passage into the primordial realm. A repertoire of symbols, including references to flight and images of a World Tree, or *axis mundi*, was used to express the shaman's ability to move safely through the layers of the universe, and pass from life to death only to regenerate again (Eliade 1964: 481).

Eliade also discussed the integral role of costuming within shamanic transformation. Asserting that "one becomes what one displays," Eliade (1964: 145–146, 179) noted that a shaman transcended profane space by means of a costume:

The shaman's costume itself constitutes a religious hierophany and cosmography; it discloses not only a sacred presence but also the cosmic symbols and metaphysic itineraries. Properly studied, it reveals the system of shamanism as clearly as do the shamanic myths and techniques.

Likewise, studies by Lommel (1967), Furst (1974), Grim (1983), Pavlinskaya (1994), and others demonstrated the integral function of costuming in shamanic ceremonies performed by particular groups from North America to Siberia. Even more importantly, these detailed studies moved away from Eliade's pioneering study, which, as Thomas and Humphrey (1994: 1) rightly observed, "avoided associating particular varieties of shamanism or forms of shamanic practice with the peculiarities of political and social environments" and "instead turned toward generalities."

Also central to this discussion are the studies

that have addressed the incorporation of a shamanic belief system into the political ideology of specific ancient chiefdoms or advanced states. For instance, Chang (1983, 1984) and Ching (1989) demonstrated that supernatural access was a requisite for political authority in Shang dynasty China. According to Chang (1983: 45):

In the past, *everybody* had had that access [to the wisdom of human affairs] through the shamans. Since heaven had been severed from earth, only those who controlled that access had the wisdom—hence the authority—to rule. Shamans, therefore, were a crucial part of every state court; in fact, scholars of ancient China agree that the king himself was actually head shaman.

Likewise, Humphrey (1994) observed that shamanic practices were deeply implicated in the formation of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Mongol states. The legitimacy of a chief or king rested primarily on his ability to "represent the social whole vis-à-vis the supernatural forces providing prosperity, fertility, and military success" (Humphrey 1994: 196). Furthermore, Humphrey (1994: 197) asserted that acts of shamanic transformation, such as ascent to the celestial sphere, should be reconsidered as highly significant political acts that provided access to information about the fate of human actions. During the formation of the Mongol states, such inspirational practices were clearly the domain of the war leaders, or rulers of these polities (Humphrey 1994: 204).

In the Americas, shamanism played a noteworthy role in the formulation of chiefdoms in Pre-columbian Panama (Helms 1979).²¹ As Helms (1979: 3, 71) established, economic strength and political authority were inextricably linked to contact with cosmologically "distant" supernatural forces in ancient Panama. Her study demonstrated that the aims of both economic and supernatural power effected the same goal: voluntary support of the populace and broader regional influence were granted for the demonstration of "chiefly efficacy in the pursuit of esoteric knowledge" (Helms 1979: 109).

Despite the variety of historically specific studies, “shamanism” remains a slippery word that has been used to describe a diverse array of phenomena, many of which are centered around the notion that ancestral spirits or numinous forces in the natural world can be contacted by religious specialists through altered states of consciousness. Rather than offering a new or more refined definition of shamanism or, conversely, suggesting that the term simply be tossed out, the present study relies on the definition proffered by Mary Helms, which encompasses the range of variation that shamanism implies, yet remains remarkably useful when considering the art of Preclassic Mesoamerica. Helms’ definition also links the esoteric phenomenon of shamanism to more tangible, even economic, concerns. For example, Helms (1993: 8) suggested that shamanism represented a “skilled craft” that, like long-distance trade, involved contact with an “outside” realm by a specialist whose actions identified them as liminal and exceptional:

The results of contacts with the extraordinary, supernatural world by acts of skilled crafting and long-distance trade involve the creation or acquisition of things that are in some manner beneficial either to society at large or to the political-ideological leadership.

As she continued, the “skilled crafting” associated with public figures became ritualistic in significance, a grand and ostentatious display of the prestige and value of the leadership itself (Helms 1993: 14). Such a statement is applicable to the dramatic displays of ritual that were employed by rulers during the Middle Preclassic period in Mesoamerica. Performances by Middle Preclassic rulers may have represented acts of crafting that “made manifest the things and ideas already existing in another state” (Helms 1993: 19). In the words of Geertz (1980: 104), ceremonies expressed a cosmic reality and projected that order into the plane of human experience. Through the shamanic act of establishing access to the cosmological realm, the ruler literally became invested with ancestral creative powers: he became a “second creator” (Helms 1993: 49, 78).

The exact relationship of this Middle Preclassic Mesoamerican belief system to better-defined, or at the very least less controversial, shamanic systems is difficult, if not impossible, to determine. Yet, the striking parallels merit attention and speak to the possibility of an ancient shamanic base for specific North, South, and Mesoamerican belief systems, which continually evolved, waxing or waning in relationship to changing historical contexts. What must be borne in mind, however, is that this Middle Preclassic ideological complex underwent significant evolution through time, as do all political systems, particularly as Olmec culture declined and the period referred to as the Late Preclassic emerged on the horizon. The striking similarities between Late and Middle Preclassic imagery, in particular that of rulers performing in the persona of birds, might represent the tantalizing vestiges of a shamanic belief system; at the very least, they suggest some thematic continuity with the past. By the same token, however, the Late Preclassic Izapa images of avian-costumed rulers anticipate Classic Maya depictions of rulers undergoing elaborate ritual impersonations. What emerges more fully during the Classic period, however, is an abundance of hieroglyphic evidence that sheds important insight into the nature of these performances, and the subtleties that can be discerned between shamanic journeys, transformation, and rituals of impersonation.

COUNTERPOINT: EVIDENCE FROM THE CLASSIC-PERIOD MAYA

Classic Maya kingship was also grounded in part on the manifestation of supernatural power as the basis for political control.²² Throughout the corpus of Classic Maya art, kings communicated with the Otherworld and conjured supernatural beings that emerged through vision serpents; the king functioned as a conduit through which communication with the spiritual world occurred (fig. 4.10). There is also an abundance of evidence during the Classic period, in both the iconographic and epigraphic record, that Maya rulers impersonated various gods (Houston and Stuart 1996; Stone

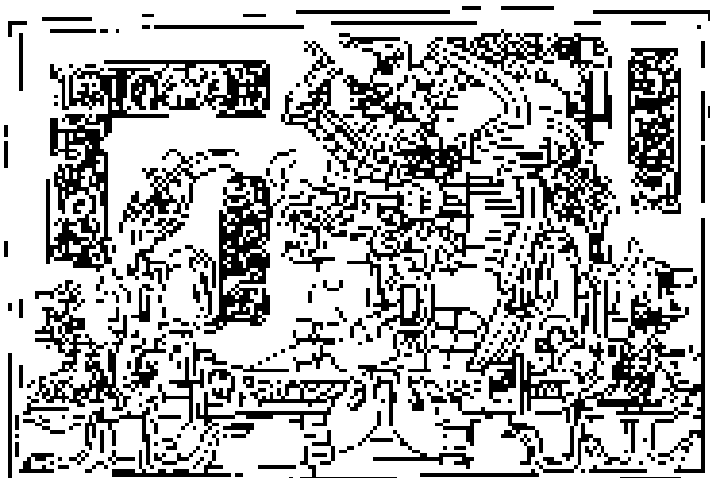


Figure 4.10. Bonampak Structure 6 lintel. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

1991). During rituals, Maya rulers would impersonate a deity by dressing in the costume, mask, or paraphernalia associated with that god. The employment of these costumes and regalia enabled the ruler to summon and possess the supernatural presence during that ritual moment, a situation that Houston and Stuart (1996: 291) described as an “intermittent” possession of divine force. They contrasted this “intermittent” possession of divine force to, for instance, a direct claim to divinity that demanded constant veneration.

The ritual paraphernalia donned by rulers during impersonation ceremonies was more than a mere prop, as this analogy with the Aztec concepts of *teotl*²³ and *teixiptla*, taken from Houston and Stuart (1996: 297–298), demonstrates:

The *teotl*, the divine energy, manifests itself in the *teixiptla*, “the Physical representation or incarnation of the *teotl* . . . [which is] called forth by the creation of a *teixiptla*” (Boone 1989: 4; see also Hvidtfeldt 1958: 76–100). In Postclassic central Mexico, costumes, masks and effigies of gods do not “represent” deities. They *are* gods in the sense of being partial extensions of divinity. In some instances, there “is such a resemblance between image and god that . . . visible forms charged with sacred power are considered to be gods themselves” (López

Austin 1993: 137–138). When dancers don masks or other elements of godly costume, the “essence of the god . . . become[s] present in material form,” much as it does for Puebloan Kachina dancers (Markman & Markman 1989: 69). In his study of “man-gods” in the Mexican Highlands, Serge Gruzinski (1989: 22–23) comments that, through association with divine force, often present in “sacred relics,” “something penetrated the man, possessed him, transformed him into a faithful replica of god,” made him part of “the very authority he adored.”

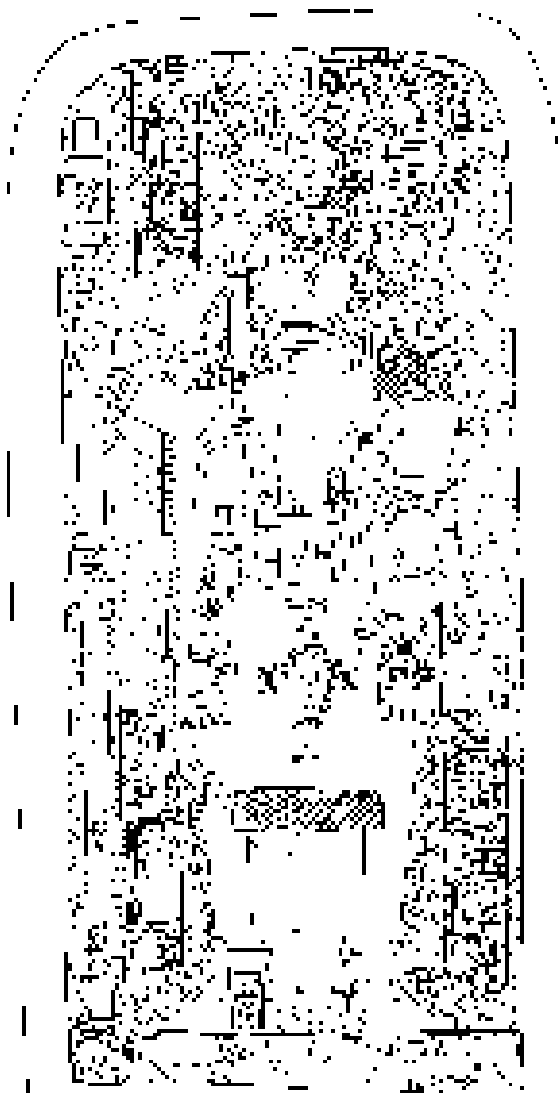


Figure 4.11. Naranjo Stela 30. Drawing by Ian Graham, Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions.

For the Classic Maya, costuming was not merely a theatrical spectacle, but the “tangible, physical representation of a deity” (Houston and Stuart 1996: 299).

In textual terms, this notion of deity impersonation was expressed through the use of a specific hieroglyphic phrase *u-ba(h)*, with *ba(h)* referring to the “image” or “self” of the deity being impersonated. As Houston and Stuart (1998: 81) explained, “textual allusions to the ‘image’ or ‘self,’ *ba(h)*, as part of this impersonation point directly to the transcendent merger of supernatural and human identity” in which Maya kings literally embodied the divinity of the gods. This hieroglyphic evidence indicates that Classic Maya rulers did more than rhetorically invoke the titles of gods, or merely invite the deities to sanction their ritual performances, but actually merged their royal person with that of the invoked deity.

An example of this phenomenon appears on Naranjo Stela 30, which depicts a ruler dressed in a jaguar kilt and grasping a ceremonial fire drill (fig. 4.11). The accompanying hieroglyphic inscription names the impersonated deity as the Jaguar God of the Underworld, and introduces his name with the sign for smoke or fire, which is echoed in the representation of the fire drill held by the ruler (Houston and Stuart 1996: 299). The inscription records several calendrical events in which fires were kindled under the auspices of the Jaguar God of the Underworld, while the image portrays the ruler dressed in his guise. In examples such as this, the personas of deity and ruler truly merge through the vehicles of image and text.

Houston and Stuart (1998) further linked these rituals of impersonation to notions of the self, which for the Classic Maya clearly superseded the boundaries of the human body. Part of this conceptual program was a belief in *wayob*, or “animal companion spirits,” that represented “aspects of the person that could move independently of the body, although with which they shared ineluctable bonds” (Houston and Stuart 1998: 91–92).²⁴ Similar beliefs in *naguales* are still part of modern indigenous Mesoamerican belief systems, in which each human soul possesses an animal counterpart with whom it shares its experiences and destiny



Figure 4.12. El Zapote Stela 1. Drawing by David Stuart from field drawing by Ian Graham, *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*.

(Grube and Nahm 1994: 686). Humans alone did not possess animal spirit companions, however. It is documented in Classic Maya inscriptions that certain deities also possessed a companion spirit, as in the case of a specific serpent that is named as the *way* of God K (Houston and Stuart 1989: 7–8).

In fact, as Houston and Stuart (1996: 304, 1998: 87–88) elaborated, these inclusive notions of self extended to the domain of sculpture, and in

particular stelae, which also interacted within this domain of perception (fig. 4.12). As they described:

The essential sameness between image and subject in Maya belief is well illustrated by the Early Classic Stela 1 from El Zapote (Houston and Stuart 1996: 304; Stuart 1996). The front image shows Cha:k, the rain god, or at least one of his many manifestations, as the “god of” (*u-ch’uj-il*) a local lord. . . . The text records two relevant passages, one stating that the deity’s “big stone” (*lakam-tu:n*) is “heaped” or “set into the ground” (*ts’a(h)p-a(j)*) on a particular date. . . . Yet the final passage hints at an equivalence between god and depiction of god. In a restatement of the monument’s placement and dedication, the name glyph for the deity occurs in place of the “big stone” glyph used earlier in the same inscription. . . . That is, now it is the supernatural who is “heaped” or “set into the ground.” This fusion of identities that can be transposed or shared accords with glyphic expressions of *ba(h)* as “self” or “face.” (Houston and Stuart 1998: 87–88)

Thus, Classic Maya stelae were more than just static stone monuments, and more than merely surrogates for the image carved upon them: they literally manifested and embodied the imagery depicted upon their surfaces, whether god or man (Stuart 1996).

Grube (1999) expanded upon these notions by demonstrating the presence of a quotative particle in Maya hieroglyphic writing, *cheben* “it is said,” which appears in inscriptions carved on a variety of objects, including stelae. In these contexts, the use of the quotative particle indicates that the objects upon which the inscription was carved were the authors of the message or, at the very least, the medium through which the message was spoken, a situation also known from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia (Grube 1999: 551). As Grube concluded, the implications of this are great, as it indicates that the

objects themselves were regarded as the originators of the written message they carried. These references reveal an essential unity between a spoken text and its written representation, but also between object and the speaker of a message. Inscriptions were not only the physical ground on which a text was carved or painted. They embodied the text in a permanent medium and continuously spoke it. Thus for the Maya, hieroglyphic inscriptions still represented ongoing speech acts. (Grube 1999: 555–556)

Such recent hieroglyphic evidence is critical to a developing understanding of how sculpture was understood anciently. Clearly, to Precolumbian Mesoamericans, monuments were active participants within the confines of sacred site centers, vehicles through which gods, men, and messages were perpetually manifested. Perhaps even more importantly, such information dramatically illuminates an understanding of the role of Classic Maya sculpture from an emic perspective. As Houston and Stuart (1998: 91) observed, Classic Maya sculpture can no longer be written off as “mere self-glorification and propaganda manipulated to persuade trusting underlings (Marcus 1992).” It now must be reassessed as a vital component and actor within the Maya worldview. This reanalysis, however, must give equal priority both to the hieroglyphic information and the imagery, which collectively expressed notions of rulership, supernatural communication, and the self. In fact, the visual emphasis on performance that characterizes so much of the Late Preclassic imagery discussed in this book may support the contention that dance—or performance more generally—cannot be adequately described with texts or words alone; narrative scenes and a rich iconography rendered in a fluid style communicate more effectively the actual experience and information intended (cf. Boone 1994: 9).

Despite the insight that these various models—for both the Middle Preclassic and the Classic Maya periods—provide, in which supernatural

communication is considered as an important ideological foundation for rulership in Precolumbian Mesoamerica, they are not without their detractors. For example, Klein et al. (2002) recently argued that such theories, and in particular the application of a shamanic model, often deny the existence of other bases for political power, such as economic control of trade and exchange. Quite to the contrary, these models willingly acknowledge that ancient Mesoamerican rulership was predicated upon an intricate web of economic, political, ideological, and social forces. Nonetheless, in

many cases, as at Izapa, the imagery particularly invites an exploration into the more conceptual foundations of Late Preclassic rulership, especially the depictions of performances of supernatural communication that served publicly to assert and validate a multifaceted voice of authority. Accordingly, it is exactly this theme—the conceptual foundations of Late Preclassic rulership as articulated through the corpus of Izapan style monuments that depict avian performances—that becomes the focus of the following chapter.

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THE PERFORMANCE OF RULERSHIP

Avian Transformation in Izapan Style Monuments

The state ceremonials of classical Bali were metaphysical theatre: theatre designed to express a view of the ultimate nature of reality and, at the same time, to shape the existing conditions of life to be consonant with that reality; that is, theatre to present an ontology and, by presenting it, to make it happen—make it actual. The settings, the props, the actors, the acts the actors perform, the general trajectory of religious faith that those acts describe—all need to be set against the background of what the devil was going on. And that background can only be perceived, and perceived in the same measure, as those theatrical components are perceived. Neither the precise description of objects and behavior that is associated with traditional ethnography, nor the careful tracing of stylistic motifs that is traditional iconography, nor the delicate dissection of textual meanings that is traditional philology are in themselves enough. They must be made to converge in such a way that the concrete immediacy of enacted theatre yields the faith enclosed within it.

—Geertz 1980

COMING FULL CIRCLE: A RETURN TO LATE PRECLASSIC IMAGES OF AVIAN TRANSFORMATION

Given the exploration in Chapter 4 of the theme of supernatural contact and its relationship to expressions of rulership both during the preceding Middle Preclassic period and the ensuing Classic Maya period, the images of rulers costumed as birds at Late Preclassic Izapa can be more fully analyzed. In particular, this chapter considers various mythological, hieroglyphic, archaeological, and ethnohistoric data that provide a compelling context within which this imagery can be understood. It also moves beyond purely formal or iconographic discussions and attempts to place this imagery into well-established Mesoamerican

traditions of supernatural communication and divinely sanctioned authority.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the compositional and narrative qualities of Izapa Stela 4 (fig. 5.1A) suggest that it depicts a scene of ritual transformation expressed as a simultaneous vision. Below, anchored to the terrestrial layer, the ruler performs while garbed in the costume of a bird. Above, descending from a celestial band, a figure that may represent the same ruler appears, transformed into his avian counterpart and engaged in an act of supernatural flight. Izapa Stela 4 appears to capture the moment or process of transformation within the ruler's ritual performance, rendered and made permanent through the medium of stone.

Another figure, with outspread wings and kneeling on a horizontal band, appears on Stela 60

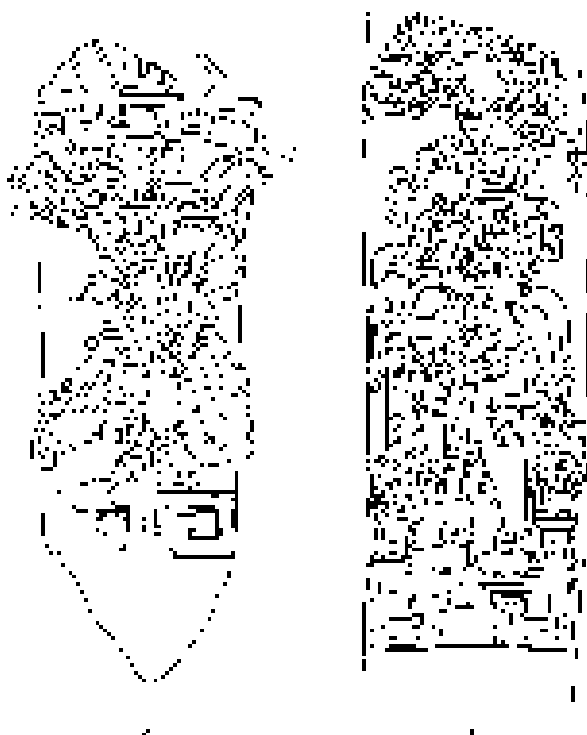


Figure 5.1. Late Preclassic images of avian-costumed rulers: A, Izapa Stela 4; B, Kaminaljuyu Stela 11. Drawings by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

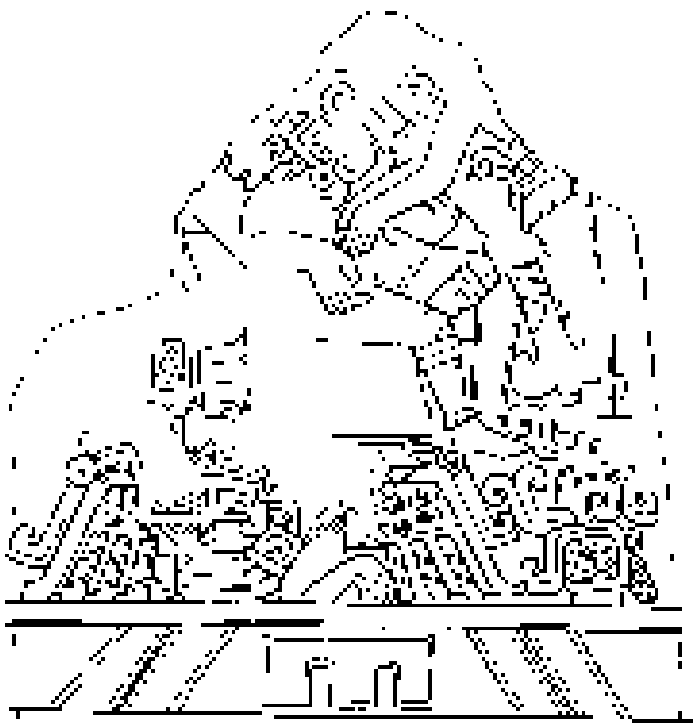


Figure 5.2. Izapa Stela 60. Drawing by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

from Izapa (fig. 5.2). The wings of this figure are nearly identical to those of the flying figure on Stela 4, as are his legs, which terminate in talons like those of his Stela 4 counterpart. In fact, the composition of Stela 60 provides a key piece to this narrative puzzle of bird performers. Marking the base of the composition on Stela 60 is a band that recalls the celestial framing device on Stela 4. However, on Stela 60 it is inverted, and placed *beneath* the scene. This formal device may subtly but effectively denote a celestial rather than terrestrial context. In other words, the actions witnessed on Stela 60 appear to have occurred in the sky, rather than on the earth. The scene on Stela 60 thus can be understood as a supernatural one, in which the Izapa ruler again appears in the persona of the bird, engaged in supernatural flight. It is, in a sense, a companion piece to Stela 4: while Stela 4 depicts the transformation of the ruler between the terrestrial and celestial realms, Stela 60 documents the actions performed by him in this celestial Otherworld.¹

The other figures that appear in the scene on Stela 60 support this supernatural identification. Although very little detail can be discerned in the figure on the right, the individual at the top center of the composition wears celts strapped to his shins. Taube (1996: 50) noted that this Late Preclassic convention of depicting celts bound to the arms and legs of individuals anticipates the mirrors or “god markings” worn by Classic Maya deities as symbols of their divine nature. The celts that adorn the central figure on Stela 60, then, probably identify him as a supernatural being who participated in this otherworldly scene.

Importantly, this imagery of bird-costumed individuals was not unique to Izapa but also appears at other Late Preclassic sites. Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (fig. 5.1B) bears striking affinities to Izapa Stela 4. The Kaminaljuyu ruler wears an elaborate avian headdress with hooked beak that compares closely to that worn by the ruler on Izapa Stela 4.² As with the figure on Stela 4, the face of the individual on Stela 11 is visible beneath the hooked beak of the headdress, enabling viewers to see the human within the bird

costume. In contrast to Izapa Stela 4, however, the imagery of Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 is much more static: the ruler does not appear to lunge forward in the same way, although he still shifts his arms as if in motion, carrying an eccentric flint in his left hand and a bound object or staff in his right.³ Unlike his counterpart on Izapa Stela 4, he does not wear a feathered costume. Instead he stands before an unusual, kidney-shaped cartouche that may represent a backrack or cape. Contributing to the sense of active performance, however, are the two incensarios at the ruler's feet, which emit tendrils of smoke. Like the ruler's performance, their burning also was captured in stone. This ritual activity takes place above a basal band that is nearly identical to the one on Izapa Stela 4, indicating once again that the scene took place within the terrestrial sphere.

One striking difference between the imagery of Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 and Izapa Stela 4, however, provides a clue to the significance of these Late Preclassic bird performances. On Izapa Stela 4, it was an image of the ruler, transformed into a bird, that appeared above the head of the performer below. On Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, however, it is a well-known avian deity, referred to in the literature as the Principal Bird Deity, that hovers above the head of the ruler, its curved beak pointing downward and wings spread out to either side as if sanctioning the presence of the ruler below. Although difficult to discern, the avian deity possesses the same hooked beak as the ruler's head-dress and very decorative wings, one of which is visible in the top left corner of the composition.⁴ This Principal Bird Deity was a mythological denizen of the supernatural realm who played an important role in the Classic Maya creation story and who is associated throughout the Classic period with magic and rulership, a topic that will be considered more fully below. In fact, the relationship on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 between the ruler below and the Principal Bird Deity above him is difficult to explicate, despite the fact that the scene clearly implies a moment of supernatural contact between the ruler below and the avian deity above.

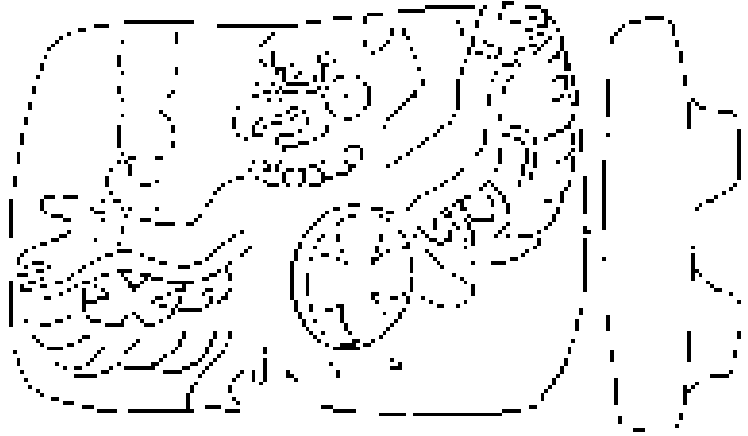


Figure 5.3. Takalik Abaj Altar 30. Field sketch by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

An avian-costumed individual also appears on recently discovered Takalik Abaj Altar 30 (also known as the “Santa Margarita Throne”) (fig. 5.3) (Vinicio García 1997: 169). His posture and hand gestures mirror those of the lower figure on Izapa Stela 4, as do the wings attached to his distinctly human arms. Although Christa Schieber de Lavarreda (personal communication 2002; cf. Orrego and Schieber de Lavarreda 2001) suggested that Altar 30 may originally have functioned as a stela, it was modified anciently into a legged throne, and then ultimately set into the steps of the access to Terrace 3, in the southern sector of the Central Group at Takalik Abaj. Given its ancient resetting, it is impossible to date with any certainty the period during which Altar 30 was used as a throne, yet the conceptual relationship between the avian performance and the office of rulership, expressed through the vehicle of the throne, is remarkable. In fact, it is tempting to suggest that a bird-costumed Takalik Abaj ruler actually occupied this throne for public demonstrations of his political power.

Several Late Preclassic monuments confirm this as a distinct possibility. For example, one side of Takalik Abaj Stela 5 (fig. 5.4A), which dates to AD 125, depicts an individual seated on a throne whose profile closely resembles that of Takalik Abaj Altar 30 (fig. 5.3) (also see Orrego Corzo 1990: fig. 12; Orrego Corzo and Schieber de Lavarreda 2001: fig. 10). Moreover, as Kaplan

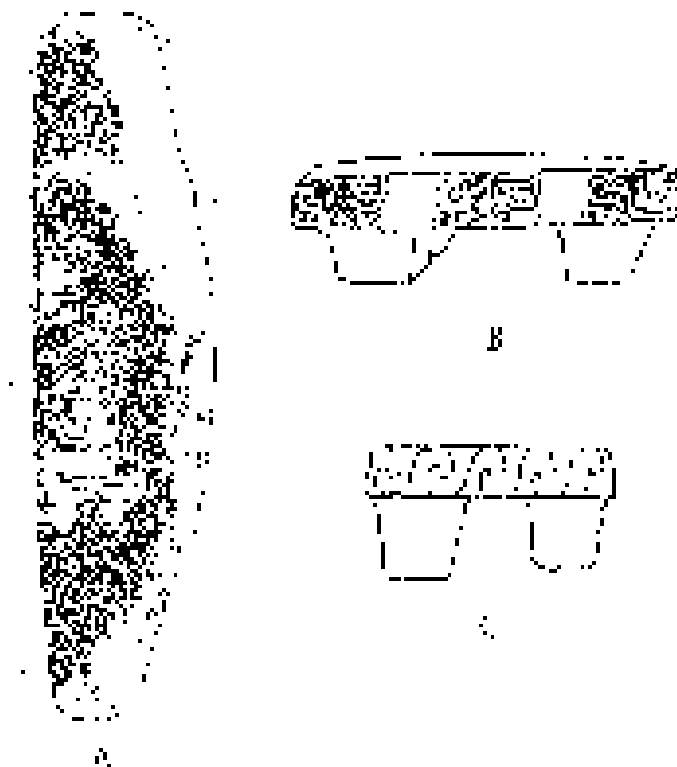


Figure 5.4. Late Preclassic thrones and throne imagery: A, Takalik Abaj Stela 5 side (drawing by James Porter, courtesy of John Graham and the University of California, Berkeley); B, Izapa Throne I (drawing by the author); C, the Incienso Throne from Kaminaljuyu (drawing by Jonathan Kaplan).

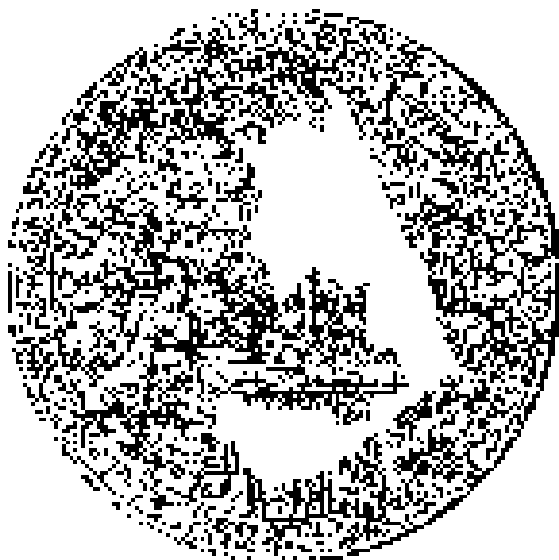


Figure 5.5. The Zaculeu plaque. After Woodbury and Trik 1953: Fig. 131.

(1995, 2000) observed, similar thrones that date to the Late Preclassic period have been found at Izapa and Kaminaljuyu and were part of a formalized political vocabulary that defined the privileged role of rulers during this time period (fig. 5.4B and C). What is exceptional about Takalik Abaj Altar 30, however, is its marriage of the throne form to an image of avian performance. This imagery of avian performance, or reference to supernatural flight, directly alludes to the supernatural capabilities of the ruler—or his power in the Otherworld. Like Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, the imagery of Takalik Abaj Altar 30 does not narrate the actual transformation of the ruler into a bird as was done on Izapa Stela 4: it merely alludes to this capacity by depicting the ruler costumed as a bird and clearly engaged in a ritual performance. Nonetheless, the context of this imagery on a throne makes explicit the conceptual relationship between the office of rulership and avian performance, with its connotations of supernatural communication.

Interestingly, Takalik Abaj Altar 30 also recalls Oxtotitlan Mural 1, in which a Middle Preclassic ruler was perched on a zoomorphic throne, costumed as a bird and engaged in supernatural access. Altar 30 further anticipates the imagery on an Early Classic (Aztan phase) mosaic-decorated plaque from the site of Zaculeu, Guatemala (fig. 5.5) (Woodbury and Trik 1953). While the figure on the plaque has an anthropomorphic torso, legs, and hands, he wears a costume that can be identified as that of the Principal Bird Deity, the same avian hovering above the ruler on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (Cortez 1986: 49). The avian masks that decorate the corners of the altar or throne upon which he stands, and which exactly replicate the Principal Bird Deity mask he wears, may signify that the scene takes place in the Otherworld, as did the celestial band of Izapa Stela 60. Such bird performances, in the persona of the Principal Bird Deity, were surely critical to public displays of rulership during the Preclassic and Early Classic periods, as their distribution at different sites attests.

THE PRINCIPAL BIRD DEITY: A HISTORY OF RESEARCH

Who was this avian deity, and why did Late Preclassic rulers feel so compelled to perform in the persona of this bird? To answer these questions, the identity of the Principal Bird Deity must first be explored. Alfred Maudslay (1889–1902: 63–64) was the first to comment on the prevalence of avian creatures in Classic Maya architectural and sculptural iconography in his monumental *Biologia Centrali-Americana*.⁵ He coined the name “Serpent Bird” to describe avians whose wings contained distinctly serpentine attributes, as on the bird in the northeastern room of House E at Palenque (fig. 5.6A). As he concluded:

It is only natural to find a race dwelling in the Tropics using the brilliant plumage of birds in personal adornment, but the frequent occurrence of the Serpent Bird appears to indicate that that particular conventional form was invested with sacred attributes. (Maudslay 1889–1902: 64)

Following Maudslay’s lead, Herbert Spinden (1975: 60–63) addressed variations in the iconography of the Serpent Bird in 1913.⁶ He pointed to numerous disparities in representations of the bird and questioned Maudslay’s hypothesis that the single feature of personified wings was sufficient to suggest that the Serpent Bird signified a fixed concept.⁷ Several decades later, Alfred Kidder, Jesse Jennings, and Edwin Shook (1946: 223–227) commented on similar motifs decorating the arms of winged dancers depicted on pottery from Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu (fig. 5.6B). Their study established the time depth of this motif as well as its geographic distribution not only in the Maya Lowlands but also in the Guatemalan Highlands.

It was not until 1974 that Linda Schele (1974: 41–61) revisited these issues, focusing extensively on the rich corpus of bird imagery at the site of Palenque.⁸ She compared the bird found on the Sarcophagus Lid from the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque (see next page, fig. 5.6) to those on the panels in the Temples of the Cross and

Foliated Cross at the same site. Schele referred to this avian as a “mythical bird,” carefully describing its head, serpent wing, pectoral, and the jade element with a mat design that hung from its mouth. She likewise noted that various details of the bird changed from monument to monument, as did the trees in which the birds were perched and the protagonists who flanked the tree. Most significantly, she deduced that the avian was part of a repertoire of motifs associated with rulership at the site (Schele 1974: 59).

Two more years passed before Lawrence Bardawil (1976) first coined the term “Principal Bird Deity” in order to distinguish that bird from the plethora of avians in Maya art. While Bardawil (1976: 207) discussed the participation of the bird within the greater complex of long-lipped zoomorphs, he also echoed Schele, noting its significance in the display of kingship. Even more importantly, he identified the bird as part of the Itzamnaaj deity complex, and conjectured that “the Principal Bird Deity may possibly be the avian manifestation” of Itzamnaaj, one of the primary creator deities of the Maya (Bardawil 1976: 209). Equally noteworthy was Bardawil’s identification of a Late Preclassic prototype for the Classic Principal Bird Deity at the site of Izapa on Stela 2 (fig. 5.7A). As he observed, the wings of the flying figure on Izapa Stela 2 are personified, much like those on later Classic-period versions of the bird’s costume.

Following Bardawil’s identification of the Principal Bird Deity at Izapa, numerous scholars focused their attention on the identity of the bird during the Late Preclassic period, particularly within the corpus of stela and altar monuments at Izapa. For example, Jacinto Quirarte (1977: 271) suggested a parallel between the bird perched on the staff on Izapa Stela 25 (fig. 5.7B) and birds from the Palenque tablets. He also identified the many feathered figures in Olmec, Izapan style, and Maya art as deity impersonators, linking components of their costume to the iconographic repertoire of the Principal Bird Deity (Quirarte 1973, 1977: 274–276, 281).

However, it was Gareth Lowe, Thomas Lee,

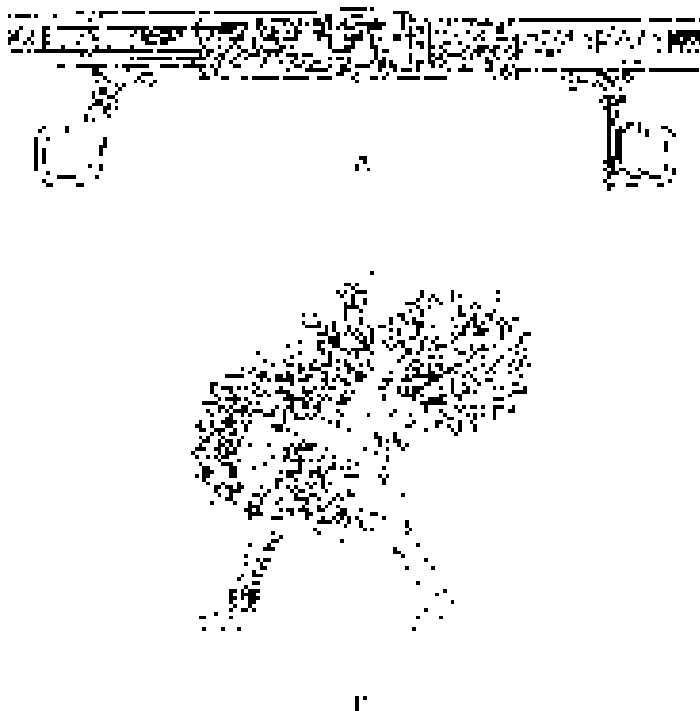


Figure 5.6. "Serpent Bird" imagery: A, Detail from the northeastern room in Palenque House E (drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.); B, Detail of stuccoed vessel from Kaminaljuyu (after Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 1946: Fig. 207e).

and Eduardo Martínez Espinosa (1982) who first suggested that the avian creature on the Izapa monuments might be a prototype for the arrogant Seven Macaw of the K'iche' Maya *Popol Vuh*. The *Popol Vuh*, or "Council Book," records the creation story of the K'iche' Maya that unfolds before the dawn of man and concludes with the mythic origins of the great K'iche' Maya dynasties (D. Tedlock 1985).⁹ According to the *Popol Vuh* account, the mythic time that preceded the present creation was ruled by a character named Seven Macaw (*Vucub Caquix* in K'iche'), an avian lord who claimed to be both the sun and the moon. As the false sun of this precreation era of wooden people, Seven Macaw served as their celestial light. Offended by the arrogant pretense of Seven Macaw, the Hero Twins—the protagonists of this cycle within the epic narrative—plotted his destruction. The Hero Twins shot Seven Macaw from his perch in a nance tree where he was eat-

ing, and the bird fell and broke his jaw as he landed on the earth. Later in the story the Twins, working through grandmother and grandfather figures they invoked, posed as shamans and "cured" the toothache that had plagued Seven Macaw since his fall. Rather than curing the bird, however, the grandmother and grandfather—under the guidance of the Twins—pulled out all of his teeth and removed the shining metal from his eyes, depriving him of his ability to shine and hence putting an end to his reign as the false sun. These events involving Seven Macaw were central to preparing the way for the next, or present, creation to begin. Interestingly, although this association between the Principal Bird Deity at Izapa and Seven Macaw of the *Popol Vuh* made by Lowe et al. was merely embedded in a caption in their volume (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: fig. 2.2), it would prove to be an enormously significant contribution.¹⁰

Shortly after the publication by Lowe, Lee, and Martínez, Lee Parsons' (1983) analysis of Altars 9 and 10 (fig. 5.8) from Kaminaljuyu provided further documentation of the significance of the bird during the Late Preclassic period. He equated the avian at Kaminaljuyu to the winged flying figures on Izapa Stelae 2 (fig. 5.7A) and 4 (fig. 5.1A), and echoed Bardawil's initial suggestion that these Late



Figure 5.7. Principal Bird Deity imagery at Late Preclassic Izapa: A, Izapa Stela 2; B, Izapa Stela 25. Drawings by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

Preclassic versions were prototypes for the Classic Maya Principal Bird Deity (Parsons 1983: 155). Interestingly, Parsons (1986: 66) also identified the presence of “diving” bird deities as one of the generally shared motifs of the Izapan style. By contrast, Andrea Stone’s (1983) study from the same year focused on Classic-period representations of the bird, particularly at the Maya site of Quirigua, Guatemala. She identified the bird’s diagnostic traits at that site, offered structural models for understanding the bird’s placement and significance within the iconographic program, and compared these results to avian imagery from contemporary sites and in Classic Maya vessel imagery. In particular, she commented on the parallels between the scene on the famous Classic Maya “Blowgunner Vase” (fig. 5.9) and the *Popol Vuh* narrative in which Seven Macaw was shot by the Hero Twins, directly linking this narrative to the significance of the bird at Quirigua (Stone 1983: 216).

However, it was not until the publication of Dennis Tedlock’s (1985) version of the *Popol Vuh* that the astronomical significance of the bird was first elucidated. Tedlock (1985: 360) described how Andrés Xiloj, the K’iche’ daykeeper with whom he was working while translating the creation epic, had informed him that the astronomical analog to Seven Macaw of the *Popol Vuh* was the constellation Ursa Major, or the Big Dipper. As Tedlock observed, Ursa Major is composed of seven prominent stars, which may relate to the “seven” in Seven Macaw’s name. This identification would figure prominently into the analyses of Maya astronomy and cosmogenesis that characterized the 1990s.

Shortly thereafter, the first comprehensive examination of the Principal Bird Deity in Late Preclassic and Early Classic Maya art appeared. Constance Cortez (1986) compiled a corpus of monuments that included images of the bird that dated from roughly 300 BC to AD 450. Working within this time frame, she subdivided the corpus into geographic regions, first concentrating on bird imagery from Izapa and then turning to the bird’s representation at the site of Kaminaljuyu. Following earlier suggestions that Late Preclassic

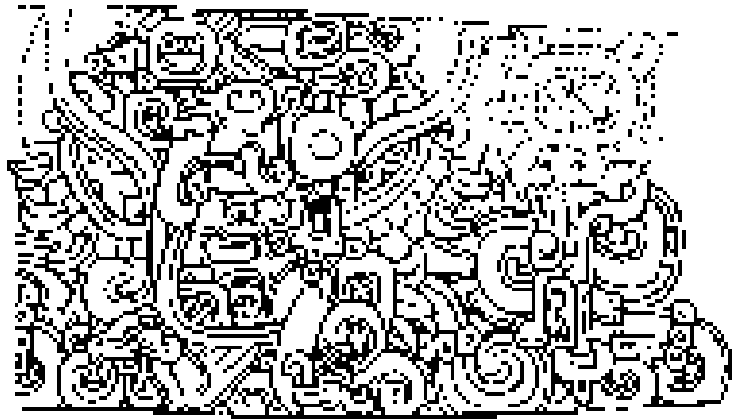


Figure 5.8. Kaminaljuyu Altar 10. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.



Figure 5.9. The Classic Maya “Blowgunner Vase.” Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

and Early Classic versions of the Principal Bird Deity were structurally equivalent to Seven Macaw of the *Popol Vuh*, she suggested that the bird represented “defeated and misplaced hubris, a reminder to all who dare threaten the ‘correct’ world structure” (1986: 73). Likewise, she concluded that during the Classic and Postclassic periods, rulers wore emblems of the Principal Bird Deity in their costume in order to symbolize their role as guarantors of world order and reference the mythic defeat of Seven Macaw by the Hero Twins that served to restore nature to its proper balance. This interpretation by Cortez would be reiterated by Linda Schele and David Freidel (1990: 473 n. 39), who wrote:

When [the Principal Bird Deity] acted
with hubris, imitating the glory of the sun,

the natural world was out of order. In the story of the *Popol Vuh*, the Hero Twins opposed Vucub-Caquix [Seven Macaw], and by defeating him, brought nature back into its proper balance and behavior once again. In this interpretation, the Celestial Bird represents a universe in which order is mediated by the king in his role as the avatar of the Hero Twins.

In the same year, Nicholas Hellmuth's (1986) dissertation expanded discussion of the role of the Principal Bird Deity during the Early Classic period. His analysis focused on Tzakol phase (Early Classic Maya) ceramics, many of which had never before been published. Calling the Principal Bird Deity "one of the five principal creatures in Maya mythology and art," Hellmuth elucidated the avian's primary characteristics during this period and noted the other supernatural characters with whom the avian was consistently associated. Hellmuth (1986: 198–199, 204) also discussed the transformative nature of the Principal Bird Deity, declaring that mythical as well as human characters could impersonate or metamorphose into the Principal Bird Deity by donning the avian costume. Recalling Bardawil's (1976) hypothesis, Hellmuth (1986: 201, 247) referred to the reciprocal "nagual-like" relationship between the Principal Bird Deity and Itzamnaaj. He pursued this issue in his 1987 study and concluded that "the Principal Bird Deity was possibly as much a phase of transformation, a statement of Maya philosophy, as an actual 'god'" (Hellmuth 1987: 363).

Hellmuth (1986: 166, 196) further observed that during the Classic period the Principal Bird Deity was frequently portrayed with features that more closely resemble those of a raptorial bird than those of a macaw, as on an Early Classic double-cylinder vase (fig. 5.10A and B) and the Blom plate (fig. 5.11). To explain this disparity, he turned to another passage from the *Popol Vuh* in which a different bird, in this case a laughing falcon, was also shot by the Hero Twins. According to this passage from the creation story (D. Tedlock 1985: 130–134), the Hero Twins were playing a

ballgame on the surface of the earth, which disturbed the evil lords of the Underworld, who then summoned the Twins to participate in a ballgame contest in their realm below. Rather than finding the Twins, the messenger from the Underworld encountered their grandmother, who could not bear to deliver the message to her grandsons herself. Instead, she sent a louse, which was quickly devoured by a toad, which was consumed in turn by a snake. Finally, the snake was swallowed by a laughing falcon, which flew to the ballcourt where the Twins were playing the ballgame, loudly announcing his presence. Paralleling the narrative of Seven Macaw, the Twins shot the falcon in the eye. The falcon then implored the Twins to heal his eye, promising that he would then tell them the secret. Having had his vision restored, the falcon burped up the snake, which vomited the toad, which then spit out the louse that delivered the message to the Twins.

Hellmuth (1986: 196) suggested that the laughing falcon from this passage of the *Popol Vuh* was conceptually equivalent to Seven Macaw, and noted other Early Classic vessel imagery in which a bird, wearing the diagnostic attributes of the Principal Bird Deity, clutches a serpent in its mouth as described in the *Popol Vuh* passage (fig. 5.12). Karen Bassie-Sweet (n.d.) elaborated upon this suggestion by Hellmuth, noting that laughing falcons, which can be identified as *Herpetotheres cachinnans*, are known to feed almost exclusively on snakes.¹¹ They are also well known for their distinct cry, described in the *Popol Vuh* passage as "wak-ko, wak-ko" (D. Tedlock 1985: 132), which is considered both an omen and a harbinger of the rainy season throughout Mexico and Central America (Bassie-Sweet n.d.). Based on this identification, Bassie-Sweet suggested that the laughing falcon was a more reasonable natural model for the Classic-period Principal Bird Deity and its role as the alter ego of Itzamnaaj than the macaw, which is the identification most frequently attributed to the avian deity.¹²

Despite efforts to assign a taxonomic attribution to the bird, its representation during the Pre-classic period appears more concerned with the



Figure 5.10. Early Classic Maya double-cylinder vase: A, Frontal view of bird; B, Rear view of bird. Photos by Justin Kerr K3105a and K3105b.

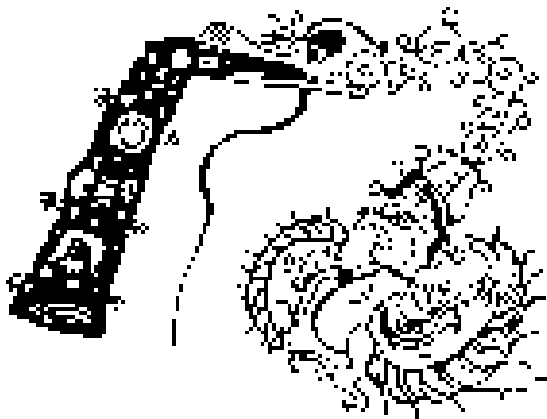


Figure 5.11. The Blom plate, detail. Drawing by author after Hellmuth 1987: Fig. 425.

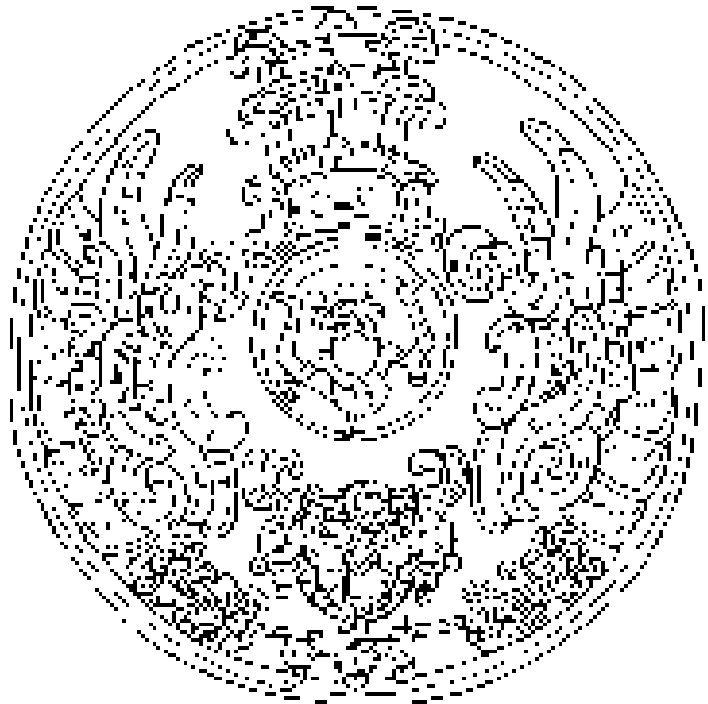


Figure 5.12. Early Classic black basal flange bowl. Drawing by author after Hellmuth 1986: Fig. 1.

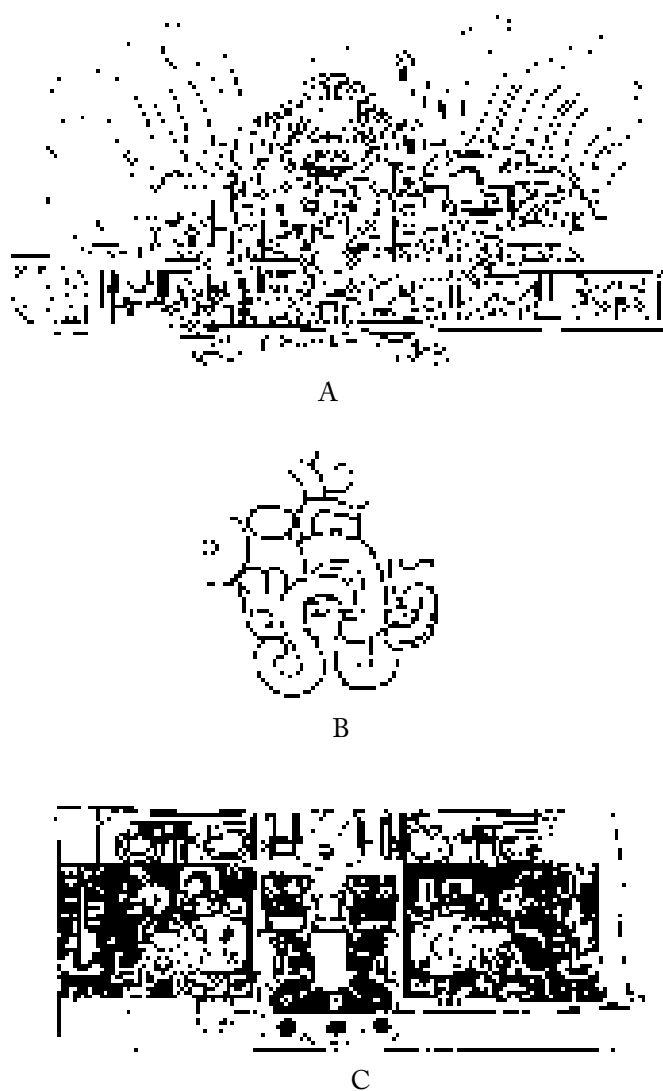


Figure 5.13. Principal Bird Deity imagery in the Maya region: A, Piedras Negras Stela 14 (drawing by Matthew Looper); B, El Mirador Stela 2 (drawing by Karl Taube); C, Detail of facade of Cerros Structure 5C-2nd (drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.).

depiction of diagnostic iconography (a subject addressed in detail below) and supernatural attributes than with a realistic, Audubon-like illustration.¹³ As Helms (1979: 106) noted with regards to ancient Panama, symbolic art often deliberately ignores accurate zoological characteristics in order to accommodate specific iconographic associations. Indeed, the assignation of multiple, composite traits drawn from different animals often connotes supernatural power more effectively than a

naturalistic representation. With regards to Greater Mesoamerica, Taube (1987) observed that during the Late Preclassic and Classic periods, there are striking overlaps between representations of the Principal Bird Deity and a Zapotec avian deity known as “El Ave de Pico Ancho,” which appears to have been modeled after the King Vulture (cf. Benson 1996, 1997). Such evidence strongly suggests that while the concept of a Principal Bird Deity may have been fairly consistent across time and space, its natural model may have varied considerably, reflecting regional differences between native avian species. By contrast, the bird’s varying form may also have signaled specific iconographic associations, or a particular symbolic role within an overarching avian deity complex. It is the premise of this study that, with regards to the Late Preclassic period, a focus on the context of the bird and its consistent iconographic attributes is ultimately more revealing than an emphasis on identifying its natural model. Nevertheless, despite this variability in the bird’s physical appearance through time, there are striking continuities in its identity as a macaw that appear to persist consistently from the Late Preclassic period through the Postclassic.¹⁴

Turning away from considerations of natural modeling, Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller (1986) instead focused their discussion of the Principal Bird Deity on its role as a symbol of cosmic authority in Classic Maya royal costumes. They pointed to Late Preclassic antecedents for this tradition, as on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 where the avian not only floats above the ruler but also appears to be referenced through his towering beaked headdress (fig. 5.1B). Although they credited the Guatemalan Highlands with the origin of the Principal Bird Deity, they cautioned that it was incorporated into a “symbol and ritual system directly reflecting Lowland traditions” (Schele and Miller 1986: 109). Moving in the opposite temporal direction, Karl Taube (1987) first identified a Postclassic representation of the Principal Bird Deity in the Paris Codex. Most significantly, he documented the association between the Principal Bird Deity, human sacrifice, and accession, point-

ing to examples such as the Piedras Negras niche stelae (fig. 5.13A), in which the Principal Bird Deity sits prominently at the top of scaffold structures, and page 11 of the Paris Codex, in which the bird is associated with sacrificial hearts.¹⁵

In 1989 Michael Coe concentrated upon the significance of the bird within the Hero Twins cycle of the *Popol Vuh*.¹⁶ He described the setting for the Hero Twins' confrontation with the bird as a universe without a real sun, moon, or stars, and in which Seven Macaw shone brightly and provided light for the wooden people that preceded the current race of men (Coe 1989: 163). Coe interpreted the bird, based on this role, as a symbol of the "antithesis of all behavior and values held dear by the Maya," a monster "left over from the previous, imperfect creations." Coe's interpretation, which viewed the Principal Bird Deity as a symbol of the last creation that served as a foil for the properly sanctioned roles of Maya heroes and rulers, clearly echoed that of Cortez (1986). In accordance with other scholars (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982; Cortez 1986), Coe (1989: 164) also agreed that iconographic evidence supported the equation of Seven Macaw to the Principal Bird Deity in the Late Preclassic art of the Izapan Style region. Although Coe did not further elaborate on the mythic role of the bird, he ended his discussion with the following statement, which captures the significance of the bird in the development of Classic Maya cosmology:

[B]ut suffice it to say that this major actor in the mythic cycle makes its abrupt appearance following on the heels of the disintegration of the old Olmec order of things, and when new sociopolitical entities, especially among the Maya, were taking shape. One may presume that this was the critical moment when the myth or myths, preserved in the earlier sections of the *Popol Vuh*, must have assumed their later form. Just as the gods and semi-divine kings of the Hindu epics provided charters for the nascent royal houses of Indian Asia, so the doings of Hunahpu and Xbalanque

would have been the paradigm for new elites in southeastern Meso-america. (Coe 1989: 164)

Beatriz Barba de Piña Chan (1990) likewise focused on the parallels between passages from the *Popol Vuh* and monuments from Late Preclassic Izapa. She matched specific stela images with passages from the K'iche' Maya creation narrative, focusing at length on representations of a bird that she identified as *Vucub Caquix*, or Seven-Macaw.¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, Richard Hansen (1991, 1992) extended recognition of the Principal Bird Deity into the iconography of Late Preclassic Maya monumental facades. He pointed to a representation of the bird on the northern basal mask of Structure 1 at Nakbe, Peten, Guatemala, as well as on Stela 2 from El Mirador (fig. 5.13B), another Late Preclassic site in the Maya Lowlands. He also addressed the recurring iconographic associations of the Principal Bird Deity during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods in Mayan- and Mixe-Zoquean-speaking regions, concluding that "the uniformity of the iconography indicates a trans-lingual deity association for the [Principal Bird Deity] in early Mesoamerican civilizations" (Hansen 1992: 128). These identifications were expanded upon by Kathryn Reese-Taylor (Reese 1996), who explored the presence of the Principal Bird Deity in the monumental stucco facades of Late Preclassic Cerros, in modern Belize (fig. 5.13C). She further commented on the bird's role within the greater scheme of Maya cosmogenesis as articulated within programs of Maya architectural sculpture during the Late Preclassic period.

The early 1990s further witnessed dramatic breakthroughs in understanding the astronomical significance of many Classic Maya compositions, including those that contained depictions of the Principal Bird Deity. Building on D. Tedlock's (1985) identification of Seven Macaw (the Principal Bird Deity) as Ursa Major, Schele (1992) correlated representations of the bird in Classic Maya art to specific astronomical events referenced in both Classic-period inscriptions and the creation narrative of the *Popol Vuh*. These observations

were elaborated upon by Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993), who sought to discern the cosmological significance of the bird against the background of the broader Maya creation story. Likewise, Matthew Looper (1995a) suggested analogies between the bird's astronomical role as a circumpolar constellation in the northern sky and key cosmogenic texts. All of these discoveries contributed to a growing awareness of the bird's unique iconography and its role within the greater structure of Maya mythology. The studies also clearly established the relationship between the bird, the regalia of rulership, and the articulation of authority, particularly during the Classic period.

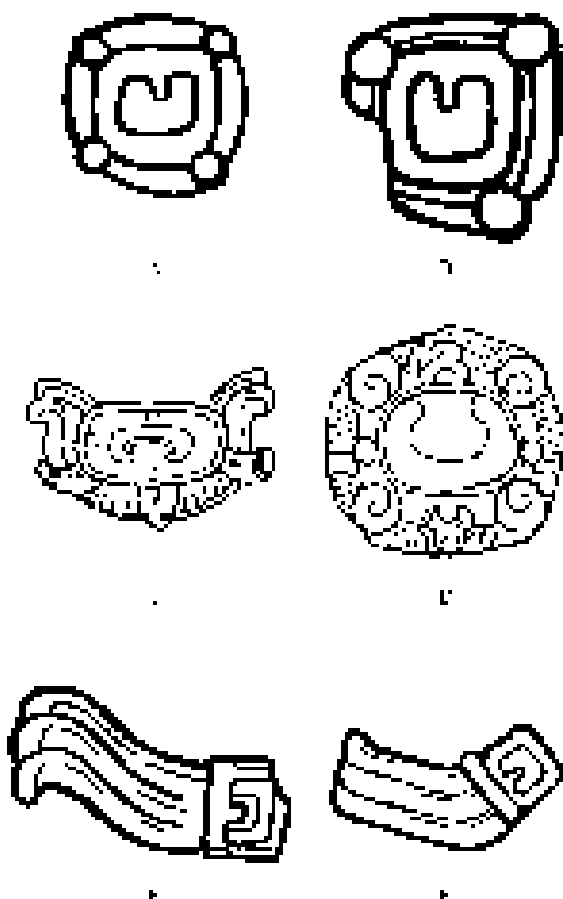


Figure 5.14. U-infixed medallions associated with the costume of the Principal Bird Deity: A, Detail of bird at top of Kaminaljuyu Stela 11; B, Detail of ruler's headdress on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11; C, Early Classic black basal flange bowl; D, Early Classic double-cylinder vase; E, Detail of winged figure on Izapa Stela 4; F, Detail of winged figure on Izapa Stela 60. Drawings by author and Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

DEPICTING THE LATE PRECLASSIC PRINCIPAL BIRD DEITY: ICONOGRAPHIC, ARCHAEOLOGICAL, AND EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

As suggested earlier, Kaminaljuyu Stela 11—with its depiction of the Principal Bird Deity hovering above the ruler below—provides an important clue for understanding the mythological significance of these avian monuments during the Late Preclassic period. This stela, as well as other monuments from Kaminaljuyu, also demonstrate many of the diagnostic elements of the avian costume during this time period.

For example, the Principal Bird Deity at the top of the composition bears a small, U-infixed medallion that dangles between the top of its hooked beak and its decorative wing (fig. 5.14A). An almost identical medallion decorates the nose of the uppermost zoomorphic headdress worn by the ruler below (fig. 5.14B). Nearly identical medallions mark the costume of the bird on an Early Classic black basal flange bowl from the northern Peten as well (fig. 5.14C; also see fig. 5.11B). In this rendition of the bird, its long tail is marked by the U-infixed medallion, as is the tail of its counterpart on an Early Classic double-cylinder vase (fig. 5.14D; also see fig. 5.10). Artists at Izapa also went to great lengths to show similar U-infixed medallions as a significant component of the costume worn by the winged figures on Izapa Stelae 4 and 60 (fig. 5.14E and F). On the Early Classic double-cylinder vase said to be from Río Azul, the U-infixed medallion likewise contains two *ajaw* heads that project from the top and bottom of the medallion (fig. 5.14D). Grube (in Schele 1992: 217–220) and Stuart (1992) independently demonstrated that the *ajaw* outside of its cartouche functions iconographically as “flower,” which in this case identifies the medallion on the Early Classic bird as floral. Other representations reiterate the floral associations of the bird, as on the Early Classic double-cylinder vase in which the bird wears a large floral diadem (fig. 5.10).¹⁸ This same convention persisted into the Classic period as seen on an unprovenienced incised bone



Figure 5.15. Classic Maya unprovenienced incised bone. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

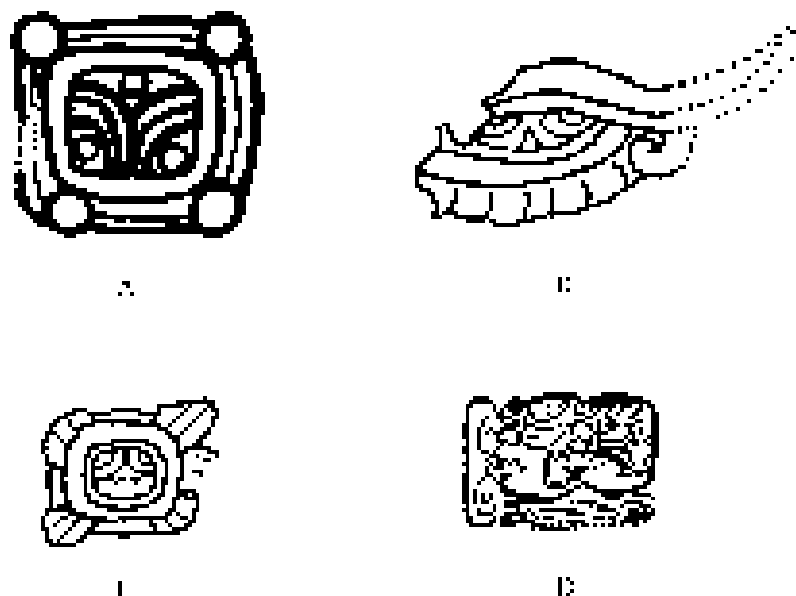


Figure 5.16. Examples of *ak'bal* or "darkness" motifs associated with the Principal Bird Deity: A, Detail of ruler's headdress on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (drawing by author); B, Detail of wing of bird on Kaminaljuyu Altar 10 (drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.); C, Detail of headdress of bird on Kaminaljuyu Altar 10 (drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.); D, The Classic Maya Distance Number Introductory Glyph (drawing by Mark Van Stone).

in which the bird is again crowned with a cantilevered floral diadem (fig. 5.15).

Yet another medallion is worn by the ruler on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, immediately above the nose of his beaked headdress. However, this one is infixed with an *ak'bal* "darkness" glyph rather than the "U" sign (fig. 5.16A).¹⁹ Two other representations of the Principal Bird Deity at Kaminaljuyu, Altars 9 and 10, also contain *ak'bal* glyphs, here affixed to the avian's wings (fig. 5.16B); on Altar 10 the glyph appears a second time in the bird's cantilevered headdress (fig. 5.16C).²⁰ An *ak'bal* glyph likewise decorates the wings of the Principal Bird Deity on Takalik Abaj Altar 13, who descends from the celestial realm as if to sanction the ritual performed below (fig. 5.17). In contrast, the avian-anthropomorphic figure on Takalik Abaj Altar 30 bears a *k'in* ("sun" or "day") glyph on his right wing (fig. 5.3). Parsons (1983) first observed that the *ak'bal* glyphs on the wings of the birds on Kaminaljuyu Altars 9 and 10 are juxtaposed to *k'in* or "sun" glyphs on the opposite wings (fig. 5.8). This

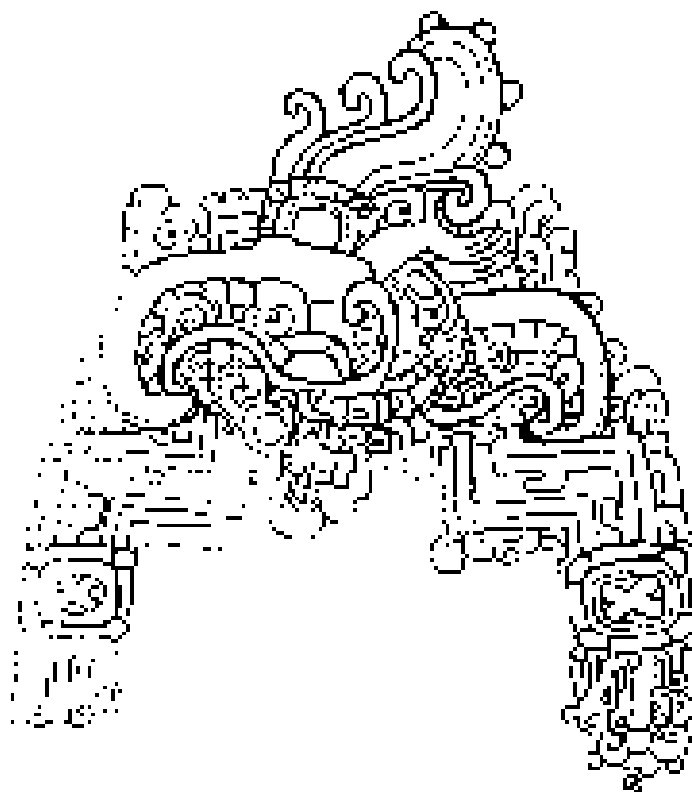


Figure 5.17. Takalik Abaj Altar 13. Drawing by author.

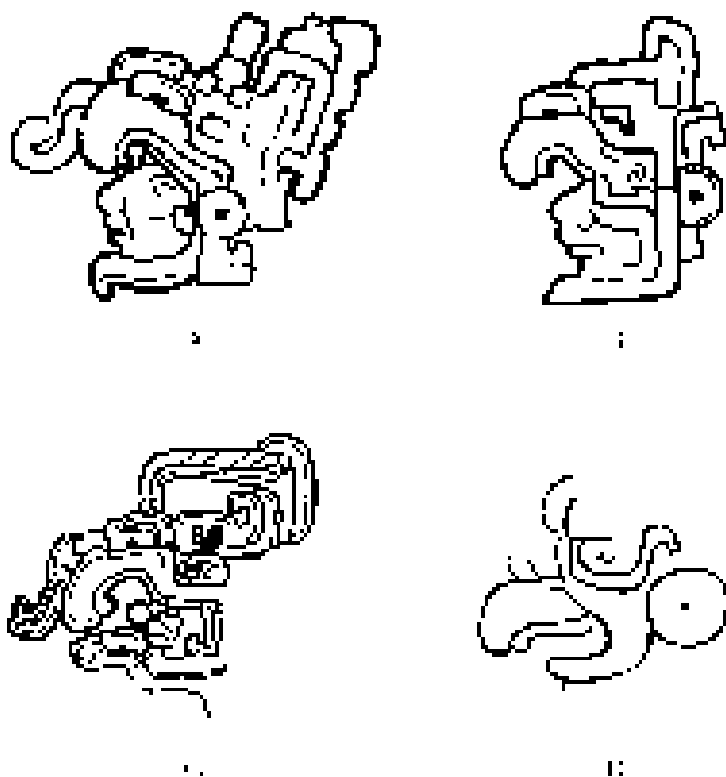


Figure 5.18. Examples of Late Preclassic beaked headdresses: A, Izapa Stela 4 standing figure; B, Izapa Stela 4 flying figure; C, Kaminaljuyu Stela 11; D, Takalik Abaj Altar 30. Drawings by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

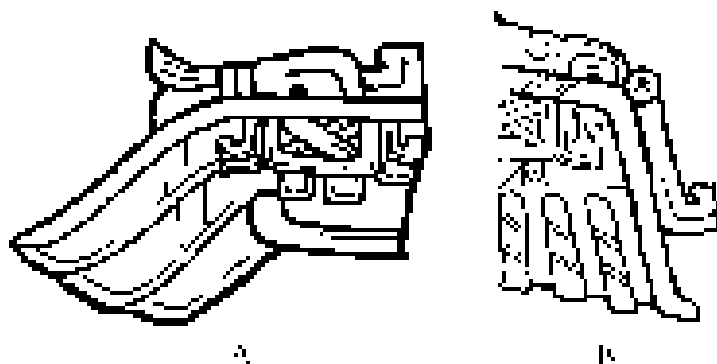


Figure 5.19. Examples of personified wings at Izapa: A, Izapa Stela 4; B, Izapa Stela 60. Drawings by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

pairing of *k'in* and *ak'bal* glyphs also occurs in Classic Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions, as in the Distance Number Introductory Glyph where it symbolizes the succession of day and night (fig. 5.16D) (MacLeod 1992), as well as in Classic Maya iconography in association with two super-

natural characters known as the Paddlers (Stuart 1984). As MacLeod (1992) observed, the correlation between the bird and day/night symbols may be related to its identity as the constellation Ursa Major, whose rotation in the night sky may have been associated with the succession of days and nights by the Classic Maya. These temporal associations also appear in the *Popol Vuh* text, in which the bird states: "My place is now higher than that of the human work, the human design. I am their sun and I am their light, and I am also their months" (D. Tedlock 1985: 86). As Christenson (2003) explained, the authors of the *Popol Vuh*, through this phrasing, specifically emphasized the associations of the bird with the passage of time, a choice that corresponds to the deity's earliest representations.²¹

The distinctly hooked beak of the bird also appears to have been diagnostic. All of the Principal Bird Deity headdresses worn by figures at Izapa, Kaminaljuyu, and Takalik Abaj possess a dramatically hooked beak (fig. 5.18). This Late Preclassic and Early Classic attribute was not limited to the Pacific piedmont and Guatemalan Highlands, but also characterized representations of the bird in the Maya Lowlands, as on the facades of Structure 5C-2nd at Cerros. Furthermore, this convention persisted into the Classic period throughout these regions, as evidenced by depictions of the birds on the black basal flange bowl (fig. 5.12), the double-cylinder vase (fig. 5.10), and the Zaculeu plaque (fig. 5.5).

Personified wings were also a common feature of the bird's costume during both the Late Preclassic and Classic periods. The wings of the flying figure's costumes on Izapa Stelae 4 and 60 (fig. 5.19) contain decorative elements that resemble stylized, serpentine eyes and noses, as on Maudslay's (1889–1902: 64) "serpent birds." Similar devices also mark the wings of the Principal Bird Deity at the top of Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (fig. 5.1B) and Takalik Abaj Altar 13 (fig. 5.17). During the Classic period this personification of the wings was made even more dramatic, as on the Early Classic black basal flange bowl where the wings correspond to profile zoomorphic creatures,

replete with eyes, eye crests, and projecting snouts (fig. 5.12).²²

Based on these various attributes, it becomes clear that the individuals on these monuments from Izapa, Kaminaljuyu, Takalik Abaj, and Zaculeu were specifically costumed as the Principal Bird Deity. The temporal and geographic continuity of the iconography further implies that communication of the bird's identity, as a mythical deity of the past creation, was central to the presentation of this Late Preclassic imagery. However, before considering the mythological justification for these performances by Late Preclassic rulers—in which they appeared in the costume or with the attributes of the Principal Bird Deity—it is important to note that there is archaeological evidence to support the contention that rulers actually donned these avian costumes. This is particularly noteworthy because without the archaeological evidence, it would be impossible to determine whether the macaw costumes portrayed on the monuments were actually worn by rulers, or whether the bird costuming was merely a pictorial convention that symbolized celestial flight or alluded to some form of contact with the supernatural realm. For example, when looking at Renaissance paintings, it is well understood that certain symbols—such as halos, or the presence of angels and cherubs—identify a scene or individual as divinely charged or supernaturally privileged. Yet it is equally well understood that these are pictorial conventions; they did not exist in reality.

In the Late Preclassic Tomb II royal burial in Kaminaljuyu Mound E-III-3, a bird mask that had been assembled from thirty-one greenstone pieces attached to an organic backing of some sort was recovered (fig. 5.20):

The shapes of some of the pieces suggested features and their arrangement gave the impression of a face; and as, in its inverted position, the assemblage was concave, we concluded that we were dealing with elements that had been glued to or set into a convex, rigid, presumably wooden backing, probably a mask or a face forming part of a headdress. (Shook and Kidder 1952: 115)



Figure 5.20. Bird mask recovered from Kaminaljuyu Mound E-III-3 tomb. After Shook and Kidder 1952: Fig. 81a.

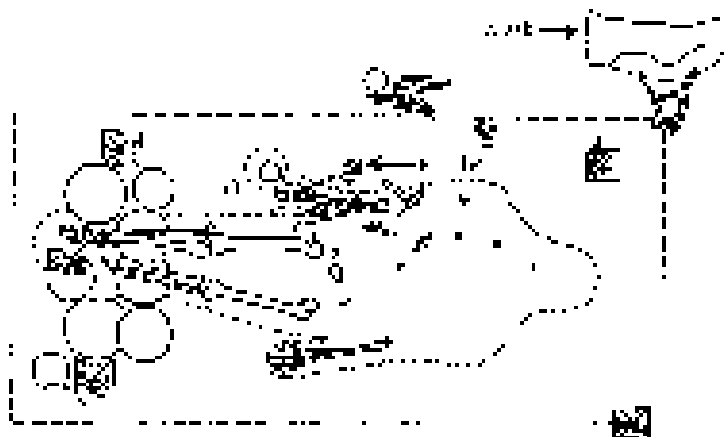


Figure 5.21. Diagram of burial in Kaminaljuyu Mound E-III-3. After Shook and Kidder 1952: Fig. 15.

The mask had apparently fallen from a litter, which bore the principal occupant of the tomb, probably a ruler according to Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (fig. 5.21) (1999: 304).²³ It had fallen to the ground, approximately a half meter away from the southeast corner of the litter, which corresponded to the southern orientation of the head of

the principal occupant. The reconstructed mask, which possessed a prominently hooked beak, compares to representations of the dramatically hooked beak headdresses worn by Late Preclassic rulers during performances. In fact, the mask warrants comparison to the headdress worn by the ruler on contemporaneous Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, which also possesses a hooked beak and similar curving eyebrow motifs (fig. 5.1B). Even more significantly, this archaeological evidence demonstrates that bird headdresses were not merely pictorial conventions utilized by Late Preclassic artists for purposes of dramatization: they existed in reality and have been confirmed in the archaeological record.²⁴ Conversely, the imagery of Stela 11 underscores the fact that greenstone avian masks—like the one recovered from Tomb II—

were not solely burial costumes, but were utilized by rulers during ritual performances that were recorded on the stela monuments.²⁵

Additional evidence from the Tomb II royal burial suggests that the principal occupant interred there was equipped with the implements necessary for supernatural communication. A small group of objects, placed beside the forearm of the individual, had been “packed so closely together that they appeared to have been held in a small container of some sort, perhaps a leather pouch,” according to Shook and Kidder (fig. 5.21) (1952: 117). This grouping consisted of an assemblage of four quartz crystal fragments, six porcupine fish teeth, and a pair of biconcave bone objects. The four quartz crystal fragments in the pouch recall modern Yucatec shamans’ use of clear “stones of light” for their divination rituals (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 126), as well as Bishop Diego de Landa’s post-Conquest description of shamans’ implements carried in bundles, which included small stones “used for casting lots” called *am* (Tozzer 1941: 154). The inclusion of quartz crystals in the pouch placed with the principal occupant suggests that the individual, in life, had performed ritual divinations or, perhaps, had been a practicing shaman. At the very least, the inclusion of both these divination implements and the avian mask indicate that one of the responsibilities in the life of this elite individual—probably a ruler according to Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (1999: 304)—had been to engage in supernatural communication, perhaps in the persona of a bird, like the individual depicted in contemporaneous Stela 11.²⁶

There is also intriguing evidence to suggest that these avian performances were not limited to southeastern Mesoamerica, but were also performed in the Gulf Coast region, recalling earlier Middle Preclassic traditions. La Mojarra Stela 1 (fig. 5.22), which bears Long Count dates of AD 143 and 156 and corresponds stylistically to the Late Preclassic period, depicts a ruler garbed in an elaborate bird costume composed of a feathered cape and a beaked headdress much like those worn by the figures on the monuments from Izapa and

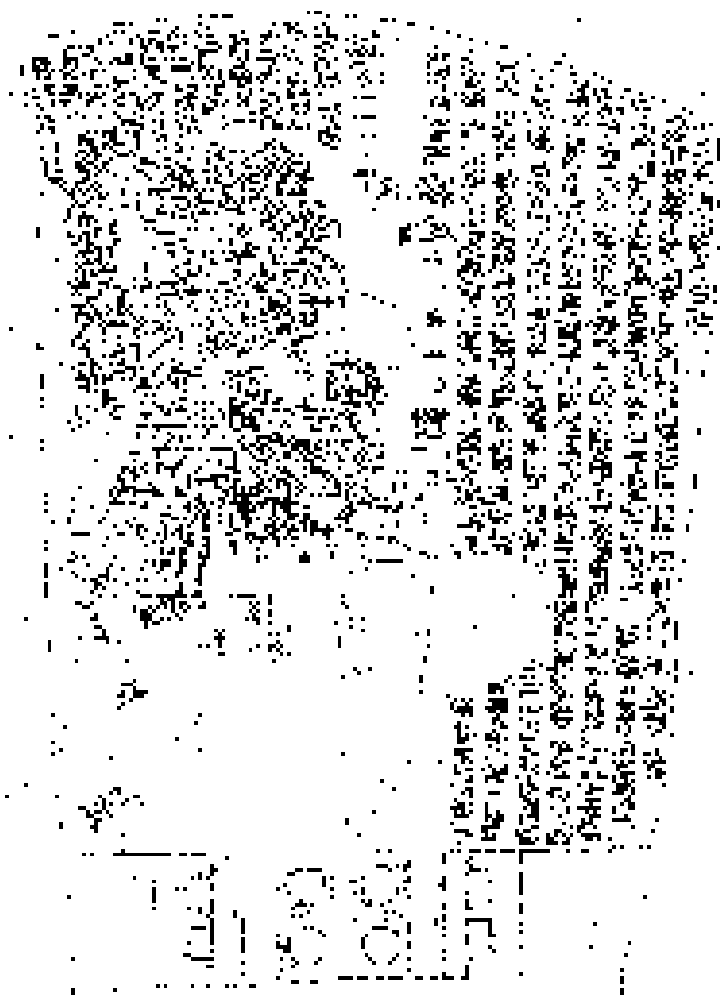


Figure 5.22. La Mojarra Stela 1. Drawing by George Stuart.

Kaminaljuyu. The dramatically hooked beak of the headdress, with two beads projecting from the nose, closely resembles that of the avian figures on monuments from Izapa and Kaminaljuyu. In fact, when compared to these other images, the costume appears to represent the Gulf Coast equivalent of the Principal Bird Deity costume.

This identification of the costume as that of the Principal Bird Deity is further substantiated by the object that floats in front of the figure's face and the object that is clasped in his hands, both of which are formed from a cartouche with projecting scrolls and beads (fig. 5.23A). The center of the upper object contains a glyphlike form, while the center of the lower object is too damaged to discern. A very similar cartouche appears on a three-dimensional sculpture of the Principal Bird Deity from the site of Palo Gordo, Suchitepéquez (fig. 5.23B). The Palo Gordo monument, damaged during the sixteenth century, was erroneously reconstructed with an extremely large nose (Termer 1973: 128). However, a 1928 photograph preserves the monument before reconstruction, and reveals that the zoomorph possessed the bottom-most fragment of a beak, beneath which was clenched a two-headed serpent.²⁷ The motif, placed directly on the back of the bird's head, consists of a squared cartouche with centrally infixed U, while projecting loops and volutes decorate the edges. Its form closely parallels that of the medallions decorating versions of the Principal Bird Deity on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (fig. 5.23C), the Early Classic black basal flange bowl (fig. 5.23D), and the Early Classic double-cylinder vase whose iconography alluded to the distinctly floral associations of the cartouche (fig. 5.23E).

The similarity of these cartouches and their consistent association with the Principal Bird Deity lends credibility to the suggestion that the protagonist on La Mojarra Stela 1 is dressed in the avian deity's costume. The cartouches also compare closely to floral forms depicted on the Early Classic Delataille vessel and on House E at Palenque (fig. 5.23F and G).²⁸ Moreover, as Houston and Taube (2000) recognized, there is a very close association between breath, souls, and

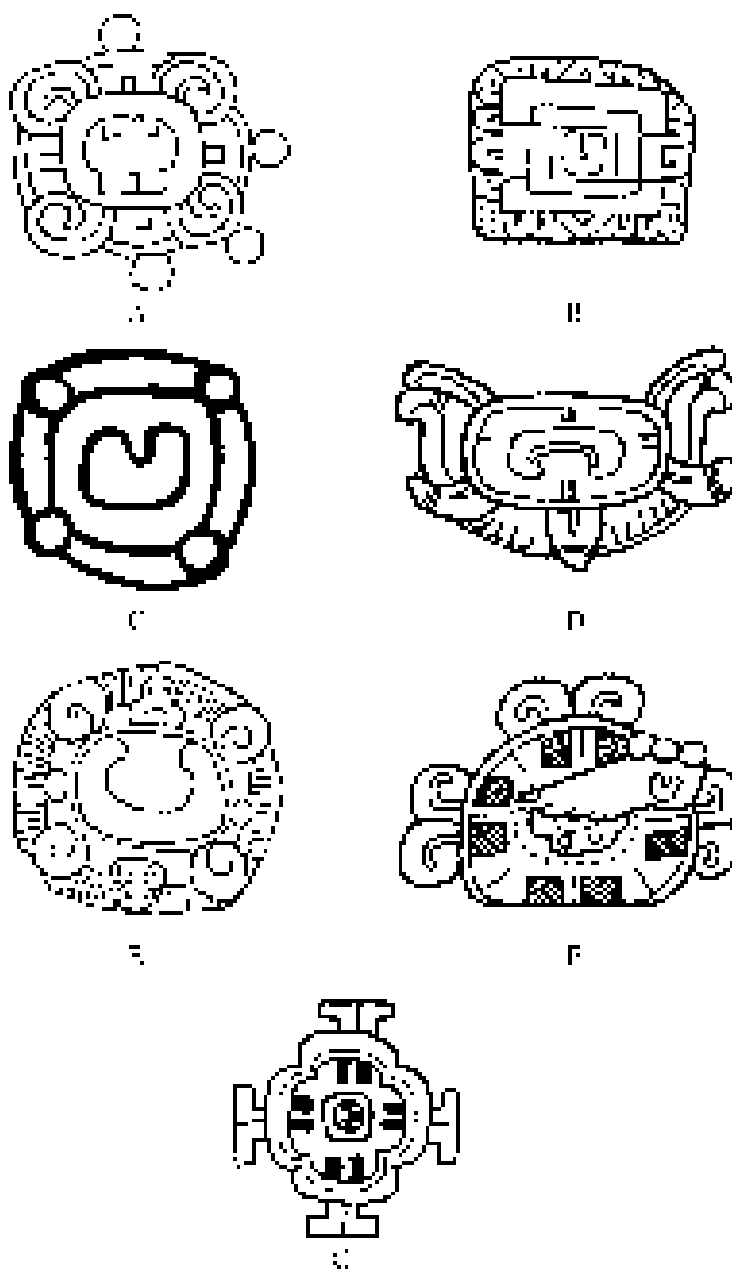


Figure 5.23. Cartouches associated with the Principal Bird Deity: A, La Mojarra Stela 1; B, Palo Gordo monument; C, Kaminaljuyu Stela 11; D, Early Classic black basal flange bowl; E, Early Classic double cylinder vase; F, Delataille vessel; G, Palenque House E exterior. Drawings by George Stuart, the author, and Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

flowers in Mesoamerican art, which may explain the positioning of the cartouche in front of the La Mojarra ruler's face, as if a symbol for breath. They further noted a belief among several Mesoamerican groups in a supernatural floral realm (Houston and Taube 2000: 271). These associations with flo-

ral forms and supernatural locales correspond well to the mythological role of the Principal Bird Deity as a denizen of the Otherworld.²⁹

As this assemblage of monumental sculpture attests, Late Preclassic rulers were deliberately costuming themselves as the Principal Bird Deity and invoking symbols and imagery that alluded to their ability to communicate with the supernatural realm. The narrative structure of Izapa Stela 4 implies that rulers performed this contact through a process of transformation in which they assumed the persona of this avian deity. Moreover, archaeological evidence from Tomb II at Kaminaljuyu, in which an elite individual was interred with the regalia of the bird and the implements needed for supernatural communication, confirms that the costumes worn by these rulers were factually, rather than figuratively, rendered. However, what remains to be addressed is the rationale, or ideological premise, for this ritual behavior: Why did rulers costume themselves as the Principal Bird Deity, and why were these rituals recorded in stone? Moreover, why were these rituals critical to displays of rulership at sites located throughout the Pacific piedmont, Guatemalan Highlands, and Gulf Coast, in regions both ethnically Maya and ethnically Mixe-Zoque?

THE MYTHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR AVIAN PERFORMANCES

As previously mentioned, Bardawil (1976: 209) first noted that the Principal Bird Deity appeared to be related to the Itzamnaaj deity complex, and may in fact have represented the “avian manifestation” of Itzamnaaj. Hellmuth (1986: 245) expanded upon this notion, asserting that the relationship between the bird and Itzamnaaj was “*nagual*-like.” However, it was Taube (in Houston and Stuart 1989: n. 7) who first specifically identified the Principal Bird Deity as the *way*, or coessence, of Itzamnaaj.

Itzamnaaj, or God D according to Schellhas’ (1904) classification of deities in the Postclassic Maya codices, was one of the primary creator deities of the Maya (fig. 5.24). In Classic-period

Maya art, Itzamnaaj generally is represented as an elderly god with a toothless mouth and large square eyes. He also played a role in the Maya creation story, as recorded in the hieroglyphic inscription on Quirigua Stela C that describes Itzamnaaj’s assistance with the events of creation (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 67;Looper 1995b: 25). Classic-period vessels also represent Itzamnaaj as an artist, sage, or *itz’at*, and reference his role as one of the modelers or artists of the sky, while others portray him as an enthroned king presiding over rituals (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 95, 211).

The name Itzamnaaj literally means “one who does *itz*” (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 411 n. 19). In Yucatec Mayan, *itz* refers to milk; nectar; dew; the resin or gum from trees, bushes, and some herbs; candle wax; rust; juice; and body fluids such as sweat, semen, and tears (Barrera-Vásquez 1980: 272). It also appears in proto-Cholan as “pitch, sap, resin” (Kaufman and Norman 1984: 121). This meaning was connoted by a beaded floral medallion that functioned phonetically as the symbol of *itz*, and which was one of the primary diagnostic attributes of Itzamnaaj. Given the semantic associations of *itz*, as well as its additional gloss as “wizard, sorcerer, enchanter, witchcraft, enchantment,” Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993: 411) posited that *itz* referred to any magic secretion, in accordance with Barrera-Vásquez’s (1980: 272) conclusions that *itz* was “a morpheme whose significance is related to ideas of knowledge, magic, occult power.” As Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993: 412) further noted, *itzam* was thus a term that referred to an individual who had access to the supernatural world, or who could manifest *itz* and thereby manipulate a cosmic substance of the Otherworld.³⁰ Taube (1992: 34) likewise remarked that in the *Relación de Valladolid*, a Yucatec priest ritually scattered a dew called *itz*.³¹

Importantly, in Classic Maya inscriptions, the Principal Bird Deity appears to have often carried the name *Itzamnaaj-ji Muut-ti*, or “Itzamnaaj Bird.”³² The Principal Bird Deity’s name during the Classic period was thus closely related to that of Itzamnaaj, and also carried with it the same

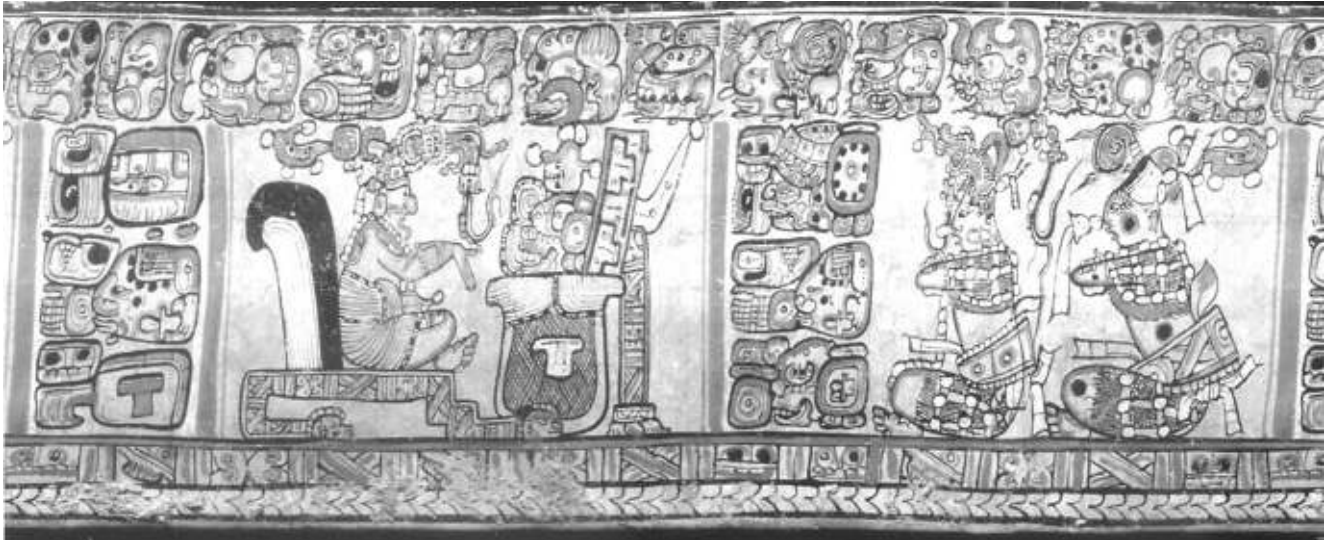


Figure 5.24. Classic Maya vessel image of Itzamnaaj. Photo by Justin Kerr K1183.

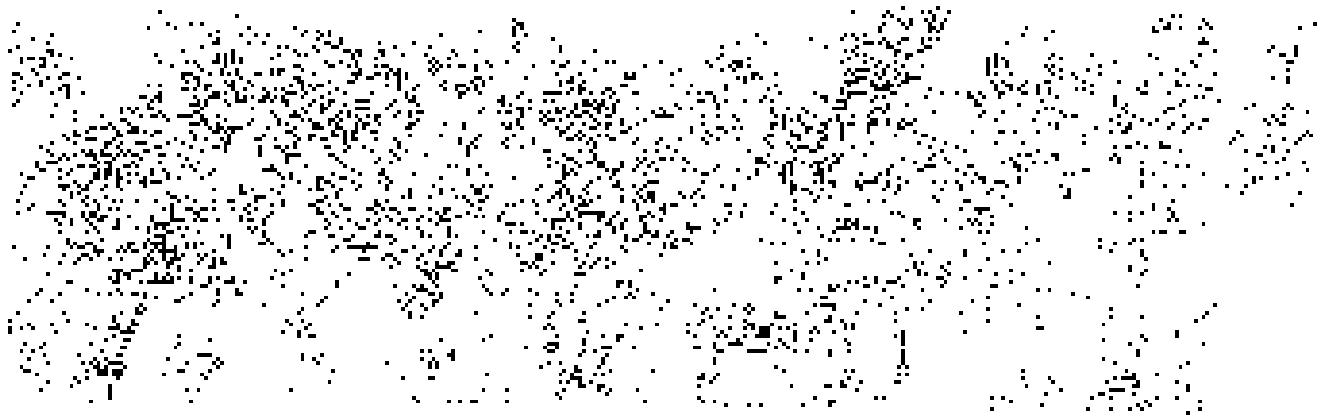


Figure 5.25. Early Classic stucco vessel from Kaminaljuyu. After Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 1946: Fig. 207e.

associations with cosmic substances and supernatural communication. During the Classic period, the bird also often wore the beaded floral medallion associated with Itzamnaaj, which functioned phonetically as *itz*, as on an unprovenienced incised bone in which the bird perches above a sky band, its beaded floral headband protruding from its forehead (fig. 5.15). Beyond these phonetic and semantic parallels, however, there also exists a corpus of imagery that details the relationship between Itzamnaaj and his *way*, or coessence, the Principal Bird Deity.

For example, an Early Classic stuccoed vessel from Kaminaljuyu portrays Itzamnaaj transforming into his avian counterpart, the Principal Bird

Deity (fig. 5.25) (Guernsey Kappelman 1997, 2004). Three of the four dancing figures wear the flower headband associated with the bird, while all four wear the personified wings. Despite the fact that the facial features of only two of the four figures are preserved by the fragile stucco, their differences are notable: the figure on the left possesses more anthropomorphic features, while the features of the adjacent figure to the right are decidedly avian, replete with hooked beak. Moreover, this contrast between—or transformation from—human to bird takes place within the context of a dance or choreographed performance.

A complementarity between Itzamnaaj and the Principal Bird Deity also appears on a Classic-



Figure 5.26. Classic Maya polychrome vessel. Photo by Justin Kerr K7821.



Figure 5.27. Early Classic Maya carved cylindrical tripod. Photo by Justin Kerr K3863.

period polychrome vessel (fig. 5.26). To the left, a figure (perhaps one of the Hero Twins) kneels before an enthroned and fully anthropomorphic Itzamnaaj. To the right, on the opposite side of the vessel, the same figure kneels this time beneath the Principal Bird Deity. Both Itzamnaaj and the bird wear floral diadems and necklaces. The composition, as well as the repetitive diagnostic iconography, establish a duality between the figures of Itzamnaaj and the bird.³³ God D also often wears the personified wings associated with the Principal Bird Deity during the Classic period, a trait that Hellmuth (1986) first noted. In fact, an Early

Classic carved cylindrical tripod underscores this complementarity in which both Itzamnaaj and the Principal Bird Deity wear the *itz* headdress and feathered wings (fig. 5.27).

An old god, perhaps Itzamnaaj,³⁴ also appears atop the lid of the Early Classic black basal flange bowl, while beneath him is an astonishingly detailed representation of the Principal Bird Deity (fig. 5.12). Both wear a dangling pendant around their necks that consists of a beaded, trilobed element, and frequently appears in conjunction with representations of the Principal Bird Deity during the Classic period. It is interesting that Itzamnaaj is almost completely bereft of a costume while the bird below him is a veritable wealth of diagnostic traits. An image such as this once again conveys a fundamental reciprocity between the two figures.³⁵

An unusual, avian version of Itzamnaaj also appears on the beautifully carved Early Classic Delataille vessel (fig. 5.28). His animated posture, in an inverted position with legs askew, suggests tumbling or dance, and he wears the beaded, floral headdress associated with the bird. Around him float floral cartouches that bear a close resemblance

to the object hovering in front of the face of the ruler on La Mojarra Stela 1 (fig. 5.22). Their placement here, clearly within an otherworldly context, recalls the suggestion by Houston and Taube (2000: 271) that such flowery forms may reference a supernatural floral realm. Early Classic images such as this, as well as the vessel from Kaminaljuyu (fig. 5.25), strongly suggest that performances or dances by Itzamnaaj, at times in the guise of his coessence, the Principal Bird Deity, carried great significance in ancient times. They also provide an intriguing analogy to the images of Late Preclassic rulers engaged in ritual performances in which they, too, demonstrated their ability to impersonate, or even transform into, the avian deity.

Beyond its relationship to the god Itzamnaaj, the Principal Bird Deity also figures prominently in the creation story of the Maya as told in the *Popol Vuh*, in which the defeat of the bird at the hands of one of the Hero Twins is recorded. As scholars (Blom 1950: 81; Stone 1983: 216) noted, this myth also appears within the corpus of Classic Maya art as on the famous “Blowgunner Vase” (fig. 5.29A). On this vessel, the Principal Bird Deity, referred to in the accompanying hieroglyphic inscription by the only partially deciphered name *Itzamnaaj-?*, perches in the branches of a tree.³⁶ To the right, Hunahpu, one of the Hero Twins, takes aim at the bird with his blowgun. As described by D. Tedlock (1985) and interpreted by Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993), this event, in which the bird was shot from the tree by the Hero Twin, was one of a series that set the present creation into motion.

Even more importantly for this discussion, this narrative of the confrontation between the bird and the Hero Twin traces its roots back into the Late Preclassic period at the site of Izapa. Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982) and Cortez (1986) identified the bird in the tree on Izapa Stela 25 as the Late Preclassic prototype of both the Classic-period Principal Bird Deity and Seven Macaw of the K'iche' Maya *Popol Vuh* creation account (fig. 5.29B). The face visible beneath the elaborate beaked headdress confirms this: it is clearly the face of a bird rather than a human. Moreover,

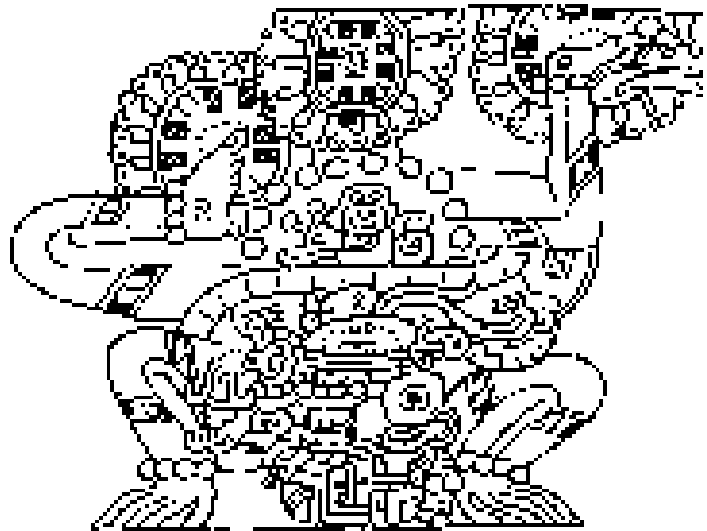


Figure 5.28. Detail of Itzamnaaj from the Early Classic Delataille vessel. Drawing by author after Lin Crocker in Hellmuth 1988: Fig. 4.2.



Figure 5.29. Scenes of the “defeat” of the Principal Bird Deity by the Hero Twin: A, Classic Maya “Blowgunner Vase”; B, Izapa Stela 25; C, Detail of stucco panel from Toniná. Drawings by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.; and Ayax Moreno, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 19), Cortez (1986), and Barba de Piña Chan (1990) related the bleeding arm of the standing figure on Izapa Stela 25 to the *Popol Vuh* narrative in which the Hero Twin loses his arm in a skirmish with the bird:

And when Seven Macaw arrived, perching over his meal, the nance, it was then that he was shot by Hunahpu. The blowgun shot went right to his jaw, breaking his mouth. Then he went up over the tree and fell flat on the ground. Suddenly Hunahpu appeared, running. He set out to grab him, but actually it was the arm of Hunahpu that was seized by Seven Macaw. He yanked it straight back, he bent it back at the shoulder. Then Seven Macaw tore it right out of Hunahpu. (D. Tedlock 1985: 91–92)

This confrontation between the bird and the Hero Twin depicted on Izapa Stela 25 is formally emphasized, as Grazioso Sierra (2002: 238) recently observed, by the Hero Twin's gaze that is aimed directly at the Principal Bird Deity above.

The Early Classic double-cylinder vase renders this same mythological confrontation in dramatically three-dimensional terms (fig. 5.10). Here the bird perches on one cylinder, in all its glory, while the Hero Twin readies aim with his blowgun from the opposite cylinder (cf. Coe 1989). The same mythic passage likewise appears on a Classic-period stucco panel from the site of Toniná (fig. 5.29C). In this case, the panel not only depicts a battle between the bird and the Hero Twin, but also incorporates a hieroglyphic inscription that describes the scene: *ch'akaj uk'ab*, "chopped off his arm" (Schele and Looper 1996: 20).³⁷ This myth was also featured in the ballcourt at the Classic Maya site of Copán, where an enormous avian with outstretched wings decorates the eastern structure.³⁸ Confirming the bird's association with this passage from the creation story at Copán is the arm of the Hero Twin, clenched between the jaws of a serpentine head that emerges from the bird's torso (fig. 5.30).

Significantly, this episode that recounts a con-

frontation between the Hero Twin and a mythic creature is not unique to the Maya creation saga, but appears as well in Mixe mythology. This is particularly noteworthy given Izapa's strategic location along a corridor of communication between Mayan and Mixe-Zoquean speakers. A legend recorded by Lipp (1991: 75) recounts the exploits of twins, a boy and a girl who, after being refused shelter in a village, were carried off in the night by a giant animal:

When they woke up the next morning, they did not know where they were. . . . The girl, who was more alert, saw the giant animal who had carried them off sleeping in a large tree. The children then cut sticks and picked up points to make arrows, six arrows for each twin. The girl went first to shoot but was unable to hit the beast. When only two arrows were left, the boy took the arrows and shot at the animal, which fell off the mountain and landed with a resounding echo below.

The correlations between the Mixe legend and the Maya *Popol Vuh* story are immediately clear. First, although the "giant animal" in the Mixe legend is not identified specifically as a bird, its perch in a tree is suggestive of such. Second, its defeat by the twin as the result of a successful shot closely parallels the *Popol Vuh* account. These analogies, especially in conjunction with the imagery of Izapa Stela 25, suggest an ancient, shared creation narrative whose roots are discernible in the monumental record of the Preclassic period. In fact, the choice to use a mythic narrative that may have been shared by both Maya and Mixe-Zoque peoples during the Late Preclassic period confirms the notion, suggested previously in this study, that the elites at Izapa strove to incorporate images and messages that were readily accessible to an audience that was undoubtedly composed of peoples of different ethnicities and languages. It also suggests that the presence of motifs and narratives better known from the Maya *Popol Vuh* should not necessarily be assumed to be solely Maya in origin; cases such as this demonstrate the possibility that pow-



Figure 5.30. Principal Bird Deity imagery from the ballcourt at Copán. Photo by Jeffrey Stomper.

erful and widespread narratives were shared by more than one group in ancient Mesoamerica already by the Late Preclassic period.

Although the imagery of Stela 25 clearly depicts the confrontation between the Hero Twin and the Principal Bird Deity, or prototypical Seven Macaw, it does not explicitly depict the shooting of the bird, nor the bird's defeat and death. In fact, the bird is regally depicted, perched at the top of the staff supported by the Hero Twin. Perhaps this apparent departure from the storyline recorded in the *Popol Vuh* can be resolved when the allusion to the bird's defeat is understood as part of a ritual cycle in which the death of the bird was a catalyst for the ensuing events of creation. The death of the bird, as part of a larger creation narrative, recalls the story of the Maize God, whose death is also prominently featured as a requisite component in an ongoing cycle of sacrifice and rebirth (Quenon and Le Fort 1997; Taube 1985,

1992).³⁹ The "death" of the bird also figuratively removes it from the terrestrial sphere, thereby relegating its identity to the supernatural or celestial Otherworld. This conceptual location of the bird is visually reinforced through the imagery of Izapa Stela 25, which depicts the bird perched in glory on top of a staff, adjacent to the crocodilian version of the World Tree, or *axis mundi*. As if to reinforce its role as a conduit of communication to the Otherworld, the bird disseminates a serpent cord that entwines the staff and encircles the World Tree, functioning as a metaphoric umbilicus that connected the natural world to the supernatural sphere.⁴⁰

Importantly, Akkeren (1999: 293–294) noted the formal and symbolic parallels between the death of the bird, as alluded to on both the "Blowgunner Vase" and Izapa Stela 25, and passages from the K'iche' Maya *Rab'in al Achi*. This contemporary dance drama of Precolumbian origins

describes the death of a victim by an arrow sacrifice, which was performed in conjunction with the investment of a new ruler, the commemoration of a founding war, or the rise to power of a specific lineage.⁴¹ Akkeren (1999: 294) suggested that future research should consider the conceptual equivalence between these two narratives, and “concentrate on the eschatological role of the victim: in what respect is his death and blood indispensable for the accession of a new king or a new ruling lineage?” Ongoing research by Akkeren has further linked acts of arrow sacrifice to the rituals of nose piercing that accommodated investment into office for many Mesoamerican rulers.⁴² The act of nose piercing metaphorically “killed” an individual who was then “reborn” as ruler, much as the bird’s “death” at Izapa established its glorified role in the supernatural realm. This research dovetails with Taube’s (1987, 1988) investigations of the relationship between the Principal Bird Deity, scaffold and arrow sacrifice, and accession rituals among the Maya. As Taube demonstrated, the Principal Bird Deity played a prominent role in rituals of human sacrifice and accession in both Classic and Postclassic Maya imagery. Such findings confirm a fundamental belief throughout ancient Mesoamerica in inherent cycles of sacrifice, death, and ritual rebirth, which may be related to the seemingly contradictory role of the Principal Bird Deity as both victim and god.

In a similar vein, it is intriguing to think about the possible functions of this narrative in which the Principal Bird Deity is confronted by a Hero Twin as on Izapa Stela 25, or the deeper political significance of the numerous Late Preclassic monuments that depict rulers transforming into this avian deity. Were these monuments part of a very specific vocabulary of power that not only addressed the abilities of Late Preclassic rulers to communicate with the supernatural realm but also signified specific events within their reigns, such as accession, victory, or death? While such questions cannot yet be answered, these lines of inquiry highlight the very powerful politically motivated function that certain narratives featured on Late Preclassic stelae undoubtedly played within ancient Mesoamerica.⁴³

Izapa Stela 2 depicts a scene of avian transformation inspired by a passage from this same mythic cycle (fig. 5.7A). However, instead of including the Principal Bird Deity as the protagonist, Stela 2 substitutes the image of an Izapa ruler who, acting in the guise and identity of the bird, reenacts the events of creation. The image portrays a winged figure with a clearly human face descending into the parted branches of a fruit-laden tree. The winged figure wears the costume of the Principal Bird Deity identified on Izapa Stelae 4 and 60, and represents another version of the ruler transformed into this avian deity. On either side of the branches float two small anthropomorphic figures who gesture toward the descending avian creature. Their configuration, flanking the tree, foreshadows the imagery of the Blom plate where the Hero Twins aim their blowguns on either side of the bird (Cortez 1986; Hellmuth 1987: fig. 425). By cleverly inserting the ruler into the creation narrative on Stela 2, his journey is likened to that of the Principal Bird Deity. Yet, through this substitution, it is the ruler that performs and facilitates the events of creation. Moreover, through this substitution, the ruler’s actions are conceptually equated to those of Itzamnaaj, the creator deity and primordial shaman who first transformed into his coessence, the Principal Bird Deity.

As the monuments from Izapa and elsewhere attest, the role of the Principal Bird Deity within the creation narrative was a theme prominently featured in the corpus of monumental sculpture at Late Preclassic site centers. This is exemplified by Izapa Stela 25, which depicts the skirmish between the Hero Twins and the bird, an act that was necessary for the ensuing events of creation. Moreover, as Izapa Stelae 2 and 4, Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, La Mojarra Stela 1, and the throne from Takalik Abaj all attest, the ruler’s performances within the guise of this deity formed an integral part of this mythic sequence throughout an extensive geographic region during this period. By comparing these scenes in which Late Preclassic rulers donned the costume of the bird—and figuratively transformed into the bird on Izapa Stela 4—to the many Classic-period images of Itzamnaaj trans-

forming into his *way*, the Principal Bird Deity, the mythological underpinnings for these ritual acts are revealed. Rulers performed in the guise of the Principal Bird Deity not only as a demonstration of their abilities to contact the supernatural realm, but also as the means through which they could assert their legacy as the heirs of Itzamnaaj, the primordial shaman and ruler. Whether an act of avian transformation was explicitly depicted as on Izapa Stela 4, implied through costume as on La Mojarra Stela 1, referenced through a combination of costume and performance as on Takalik Abaj Altar 30, or rendered in mythological terms as on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, these rituals of Late Preclassic rulers were conceptually parallel to the transformation of Itzamnaaj into his avian coessence, the Principal Bird Deity.

Yet, the nature of these performances in which Late Preclassic rulers invoked their legacy as the analog, in the natural realm, to Itzamnaaj, merits more attention. Why did Late Preclassic rulers choose to record and monumentalize ritual moments in which they established an equivalency between their avian performances and those of Itzamnaaj? With regards to the Classic period, Houston and Stuart (1996: 300) tendered a similar query:

The question remains why certain gods were selected for impersonation. Why was it deemed necessary, for example, for a noble to assume the identity of the Maize God or for the “Water Serpent” to undertake certain rituals? Lost details of mythic narratives once held some of the answers, no doubt. Impersonators, in any event, may have been considered recurring manifestations of deities who “participated” in repeating ritual cycles.

As they elaborated, impersonation ceremonies moved beyond a ruler’s ability to “possess” a god or assume its identity and allowed the deities to actually participate within contemporary ritual cycles. The concept of a *way*—or coessence—was an important component of these rituals in which rulers demonstrated their dialogue with the supernatural. As Houston and Stuart (1996: 291) noted,

the category of *way* “helped constitute the psychological and spiritual make-up” of Classic Maya rulers, and provided another vehicle through which they could demonstrate their similitude to the gods. The actual act of impersonation, added Houston and Stuart (1996: 308), was also the means through which the hierarchy of rulership was performed and defined; in other words, it established “an obvious qualitative difference from those of lower social and political standing.” Rulers were portrayed simultaneously as gods and men who exerted control of supernatural powers and conjured the identity of the gods at will.⁴⁴

For Late Preclassic rulers, this was eloquently expressed through the rituals in which they invoked—and participated within—the identities of Itzamnaaj and the Principal Bird Deity. Again, Houston and Stuart (1996: 290) commented on this phenomenon during the Classic period:

Royal divinity can also be reinforced by myth and ritual. To those who believe, myths provide incontrovertible, narrative rationales for why things exist in the way that they do. A subset of myths includes royal charters, stories that justify or explain regal behavior. Similarly, as “highly structured, standardized sequences,” rituals often engage distant events, forces, or beings that are described in myth or charters and make them tangible and potent in the present (Kertzer 1988: 9).

. . . A more subtle invocation of divinity consists of stories that liken royal lives to the immutable patterns set by gods. Implicit here is not only the notion of remote events and beings, but the continual repetition of such patterns in later times. For Mesoamerica, Nicholson (1971) calls this “pattern history,” founded on the idea of recurrence: as calendar cycles, or certain permutations of these cycles, repeat, they produce like-in-kind repetitions of mythological or historical events.

Through the performance of avian rituals, time literally stood still for Late Preclassic audiences and the moment of creation replayed before their

eyes. The narrative focus of these performances by Late Preclassic rulers was the Principal Bird Deity's mythic cycle, which made visible an overlapping cycle of death and rebirth. This mythic cycle also allowed Late Preclassic rulers to demonstrate—and publicly perform—their role as a conduit to the supernatural realm. At a very basic level, these ritual performances were vital to the display and legitimation of rulership during the Late Preclassic period. On a more conceptual level, avian rituals enabled a ruler to frame these responsibilities within a mythological vocabulary that overtly referenced the creative acts of Itzamnaaj and the Principal Bird Deity: the avian performances of rulers structurally paralleled the greater myth of Itzamnaaj and the Principal Bird Deity. Monuments depicting these rituals attested to the ruler's legacy as the natural analog to the primordial ruler Itzamnaaj, who first possessed the ability to transform into his avian counterpart and perform the cosmic journey. Supernatural communication and cosmic flight were not only central to the myth, but existed at the heart of Late Preclassic rulership as well.

LATE PRECLASSIC COSMIC COMMUNICATION AND RULERSHIP

Stepping back from the Late Preclassic imagery, it becomes clear that these recurring scenes of avian performance are part of a distinctly Mesoamerican cultural tradition that consistently emphasized the ability of rulers to commune with the supernatural realm. During the Middle Preclassic period, as demonstrated by Furst (1968), Reilly (1994, 1995), Grove (1970), and Grove and Gillespie (1992), notions of supernatural communication seem to have been predicated, in many cases, on a shamanic belief system in which rulers performed ecstatic journeys, “traveled” to the cosmic realm, or visually transformed into their animal counterparts as evidenced by the jaguar transformation figurines. By the Classic Maya period, as recorded in the hieroglyphic inscriptions, this supernatural communication was often manifested, instead, through the concept of *ajaw*, or the divine ruler

who could impersonate the gods at will and ritually summon their awesome forces.

Temporally wedged between these two qualitatively distinct, yet comparable, belief systems was that of the Late Preclassic period, as manifested at sites such as Izapa, La Mojarra, Takalik Abaj, and Kaminaljuyu. While the images of rulers performing as birds (and graphically morphing into the Principal Bird Deity on Izapa Stela 4) bear a striking resemblance to Middle Preclassic antecedents, it is unwise to declare that they represent the same, intact, belief system—shamanic or otherwise—that characterized the Middle Preclassic period. After all, as numerous scholars have demonstrated across the globe, no religious system is static; all transform over time and across space. Yet, it would be equally naive to argue that the Late Preclassic predilection for avian performances is absolutely equivalent to the notion of impersonation as documented in the hieroglyphic inscriptions of the later Classic Maya. Perhaps a more useful way to approach the corpus of Late Preclassic imagery is as part of an ever-evolving continuum of ancient Mesoamerican belief, which appears to have consistently emphasized the relationship between rulers and the supernatural sphere. In the meantime, although terms like “transformation”—used above to describe the image of the Late Preclassic ruler on Izapa Stela 4—lack precision, they also acknowledge the continuities between imagery from the Preclassic and Classic periods. After all, impersonation—the term preferred by scholars working on Classic Maya material—is, at some basic level, a form of transformation, in which identities merge and the lines between natural and supernatural dissolve.⁴⁵

Rather than dwelling on definitional and semantic questions that, for the Late Preclassic period, are not answerable at this time, it seems prudent to let the imagery speak for itself. When considered as a whole, the corpus of avian performance monuments from the Late Preclassic period indicates that contact with the divine was essential to the display and validation of rulership during that period. This is not to say, however, that rulership was predicated solely on religion.

Clearly, other critical factors—economic, social, and political—contributed to a Late Preclassic matrix of authority. Yet, as the monuments attest, the religious role of Late Preclassic rulers was more than a fleeting concern: their acts of divine communication were recorded and monumentalized in sacred site centers across linguistic boundaries, and indicate a pattern of expression that was shared widely throughout Late Preclassic Mesoamerica.

Having explored the imagery of avian perform-

ance in detail, we must now consider the monuments within the context of the site centers in which they were erected. Chapter 6 focuses on how the monuments helped to structure and define sacred space in conjunction with the built environment and human actors. In an attempt to more fully contextualize the phenomenon of avian performance during the Late Preclassic, Chapter 6 goes beyond the imagery of bird dancers and broaches larger issues concerning the nature of sacred space as a means of articulating social order.

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MONUMENTS IN CONTEXT

[C]eremonial centers were elaborated into complexes of public ceremonial structures, usually massive and often extensive, and including assemblages of such architectural items as pyramids, platform mounds, temples, palaces, terraces, staircases, courts, and stelae. Operationally they were instruments for the creation of political, social, economic, and sacred space, at the same time as they were symbols of cosmic, social, and moral order.

—*Wheatley 1971*

CONSTRUCTING SACRED SPACE: AN INTRODUCTION

The political justification for and mythological underpinnings of the avian performance monuments scattered throughout Late Preclassic sites between the Gulf and Pacific coasts, as discussed in the previous chapter, are only one part of the equation. Another critical aspect to consider is their original context within the confines of Late Preclassic ritual centers. The site of Izapa offers the most productive opportunity to do this, as it contains the most extensive corpus of Izapan style sculpture and because the vast majority of the monuments were recovered in situ, in a Late Preclassic context (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 159). Moreover, plaza groups and their associated sculpture at Izapa appear to have been conceived of as coherent assemblages, organized around specific themes. These plaza groups worked in tandem with each other, each expressing potent messages of political and cosmologically sanctioned authority.

The approach taken in this chapter considers the monuments as actors upon the stage of the sacred site center. More than just a sculptural backdrop to the performances within their midst, the monu-

ments actively structured the sacred environment and worked in conjunction with architecture, human actors, and the natural landscape. By considering these ancient site centers and their associated sculpture as dynamic systems, the mechanisms through which Late Preclassic rulers orchestrated ritual space and invested it with cosmic significance are illuminated.

The concept of sacred space figures prominently into these notions. Eliade (1996: 367–387), working within the discipline of the history of religion, described how the establishment of a site center necessitated more than the erection of walls or structures; it symbolically represented the recreation of the world. In essence, sacred centers were a human-made microcosm of the greater universe, replicating natural landmarks and forms on a smaller, more human scale. They were, however, more than just a model of the physical world around them: they embodied notions of supernatural order, which in turn provided a framework and the theoretical justifications for political order (Geertz 1980: 13; Wheatley 1971: 225, 478).¹ Sacred centers also demarcated holy or sacred ground, separating it both physically and conceptually from the surrounding profane space of everyday life.

SACRED SPACE AT IZAPA:
AVIAN PERFORMANCE WITHIN THE
CONTEXT OF CREATION

As briefly introduced in Chapter 2, one of the primary vehicles through which sacred space was articulated at Izapa was the stela form. Yet, stelae did not merely communicate highly charged ideological messages concerning the nature of Late Preclassic rulership. They also embodied the very essence of Late Preclassic ritual as sculptural analogs of the rulers themselves: they permanently captured ritual moments in which rulers communed with the supernatural realm and validated their claims to authority in this world. They were also continually revitalized through ongoing ceremonial activity (Newsome 1998; Stuart 1996). In other words, the stelae beg to be considered as more than mute testimony to performances locked in the past, or exhausted political statements. They demand consideration as actors—in many cases synonymous with the rulers themselves—that played direct roles in the patterning of ritual activity during the Late Preclassic period. In fact, the stela-altar dyad that characterizes many sites during this period—and continued to flourish during the ensuing Classic period—provides a unique lens through which one can consider the successful partnership between sculptural form, content, human actors, and the built environment.

However, before pursuing this sculptural vehicle in greater detail, the context in which it appears must first be pursued. What were the messages of the architectural settings that incorporated these sculptural programs? And how did Late Preclassic rulers insert themselves and their actions into this constructed space? At Izapa, the merger—or, to use Sahlin's (1985) terminology, "conjunction"—of space, architecture, sculpture, myth, and human action created a dynamic environment in which primordial time and the present were seamlessly woven together, creating a veritable web of politics and cosmogenesis. Of course, as noted in Chapter 2, it must be readily acknowledged that the messages encoded into the built environment were

orchestrated by the ruling elite, and designed to support conceptually the agenda of the ruler. However, the imagery and metaphors that facilitated this goal were often grounded in concepts more readily accessible to a nonelite audience, such as astronomy, agriculture, or broadly shared mythic narratives undoubtedly based in ancient oral traditions. Accordingly, these monumental public messages—although sponsored by the elite and, in great part, aimed at other nonlocal elites—must have had some impact on the resident population.

Dominating the center of Izapa, as described in Chapter 2, was Mound 60, which created a focal point for the organization of mounds and architecture at the site (fig. 6.1). With the series of reservoirs, dams, and aqueducts at its base that channeled water from the central plazas to the river to the east, Mound 60 appears to have symbolized a mountain of creation and sustenance, floating amidst the primordial sea (fig. 6.2) (Guernsey Kappelman 2001). This model, in which a pyramid arose from water or a sunken plaza, re-created an ancient Mesoamerican aesthetic trope that had been utilized by the Olmec to structure their sacred site centers. It was also invoked by later Maya peoples to manifest the landscape of creation, and would be used over a millennium later by the Aztecs to give order and meaning to their capital, Tenochtitlán.² This powerful architectural archetype, for Mesoamericans, identified each site as the center of the universe and the place in which the events of creation perpetually unfolded.

Located immediately to the west of Mound 60 was Plaza Group A, which formed the western boundary of the central ritual precinct at Izapa. It, in conjunction with Group B on the opposite side of Mound 60, held the highest concentration of sculpture at the site. Indeed, these two sculptural plazas to the sides of Mound 60 appear to have been the locus of ritual activity at Izapa during the Late Preclassic period. Beyond its physical proximity to Mound 60, Group A was also functionally—and symbolically—linked to the heart of the site. Waters that collected in the plaza of Group A

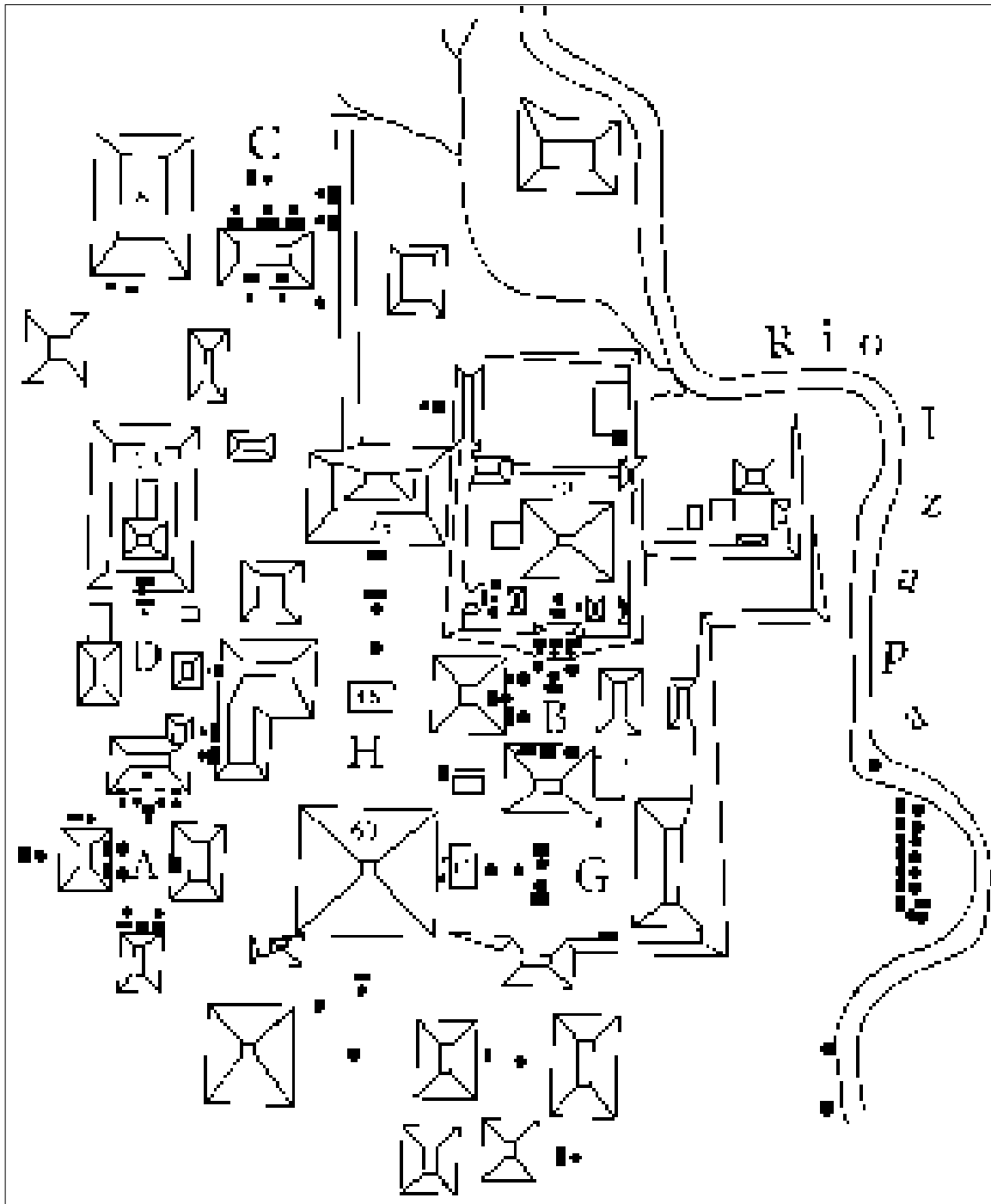


Figure 6.1. Map of central Izapa. After Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: end map.

were channeled to the reservoir on the west side of Mound 60 by an inlet drain formed of flat stones located at the southeastern corner of Mound 57 (fig. 6.2) (Gómez Rueda 1995; Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 171). While this drain served an obviously functional purpose of alleviating stand-

ing water from the plaza, it also carried water to the symbolic primordial sea at the base of Mound 60, creating a network of channels that transported the waters of creation (Gómez Rueda 1995: 10–12; Guernsey Kappelman 2001: 88).³ This Late Preclassic system of channeled water

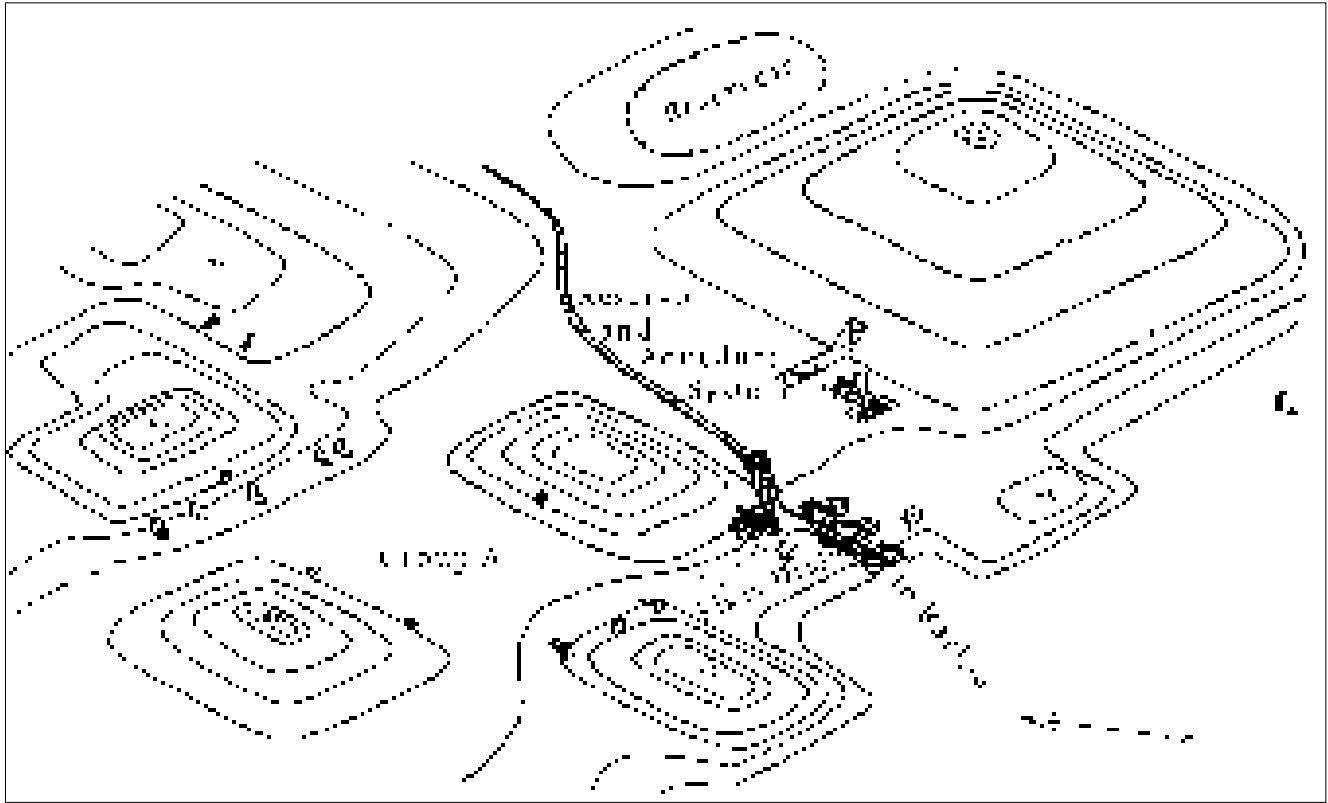


Figure 6.2. Izapa Mound 60 and associated hydraulic systems. After Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: Fig. 8.8.



Figure 6.3. Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 3 water trough in the form of a serpent. Photo by author.

paralleled those utilized by the Middle Preclassic Olmec and later Mesoamerican peoples, and indicates that specific, consistently defined structuring principles were used anciently not only for obvious functional reasons but also because they carried with them messages of cosmic order and legitima-

tion (cf. Wheatley 1971). Fragments of sculpted troughs, such as Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 3 in which water was channeled through the body of a finely carved serpent, attest that these drains possessed significance beyond their functional capabilities (fig. 6.3) (Norman 1976: 260–261).

Group A also contained the majority of monuments depicting avian rituals and transformation. At the apex of the sculptural assemblage in Group A stood Stela 4, with its depiction of an Izapa ruler transforming into the Principal Bird Deity in a demonstration of his role as the analog to Itzam-naaj (fig. 6.4). Recessed slightly behind its counterparts, Stela 4 stood on top of a low platform in front of Mound 56, which marked the northern boundary of Group A's quadrilateral plaza. Adjacent to Stela 4 was Stela 25, which depicted the skirmish between the bird and the Hero Twin described in the *Popol Vuh* creation story. Stelae 4 and 25, placed side by side in Group A, thus formed a conceptual unit: while Stela 4 captured the moment of transformation, Stela 25 provided

the mythological justification for these performances by Late Preclassic rulers.

Directly opposite them, at the southern edge of Group A in front of Mound 58, stood Stela 2 with its image of an Izapa ruler directly inserted into the mythic narrative of the Principal Bird Deity. In a sense, Stela 2 synthesized the imagery of Stelae 4 and 25, merging them together in a scene that not only invoked the supernatural powers of the ruler but also phrased them directly within a mythological context. These monuments, placed at opposite ends of the plaza, worked in tandem, creating a dialogue across the length of the plaza that addressed the cosmological performances by Late Preclassic rulers. Their orientation also mirrored that of the central axis of the site, twenty-one degrees east of north, as well as the overarching linear relationship between massive Mound 60, Mound 25 to the north, and the volcano Tacaná on the horizon.

The theme of avian transformation also was reiterated on Altar 3 (figs. 6.4 and 6.5), placed at the base of Stela 7 that stood adjacent to Stela 4 at the foot of Mound 56. This round altar depicted yet another image of an Izapa ruler transformed into his avian counterpart. On Altar 3 the ruler's face is readily visible beneath the hooked beak headdress. While his face is distinctly anthropomorphic, the rest of his body is decidedly avian: feathered wings project out from his torso while his legs terminate in talons, much as they had on the flying figures on Stelae 2 and 4. The composite avian-human figure alights on a terrestrial band exactly like that of Stela 4 and Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, indicating that this scene of flight, unlike that featured on Stela 60, took place within the terrestrial realm.

Other monuments in Group A amplify the context for these Late Preclassic avian performances. Punctuating the western end of the row of stelae in front of Mound 56 was Stela 5 (fig. 6.4; also see fig. 1.3), with the most complicated and dense imagery of all the Izapa monuments. An enormous World Tree bisects the central image of Stela 5, connecting the levels of the universe and marking the center of the world (cf. Jakeman

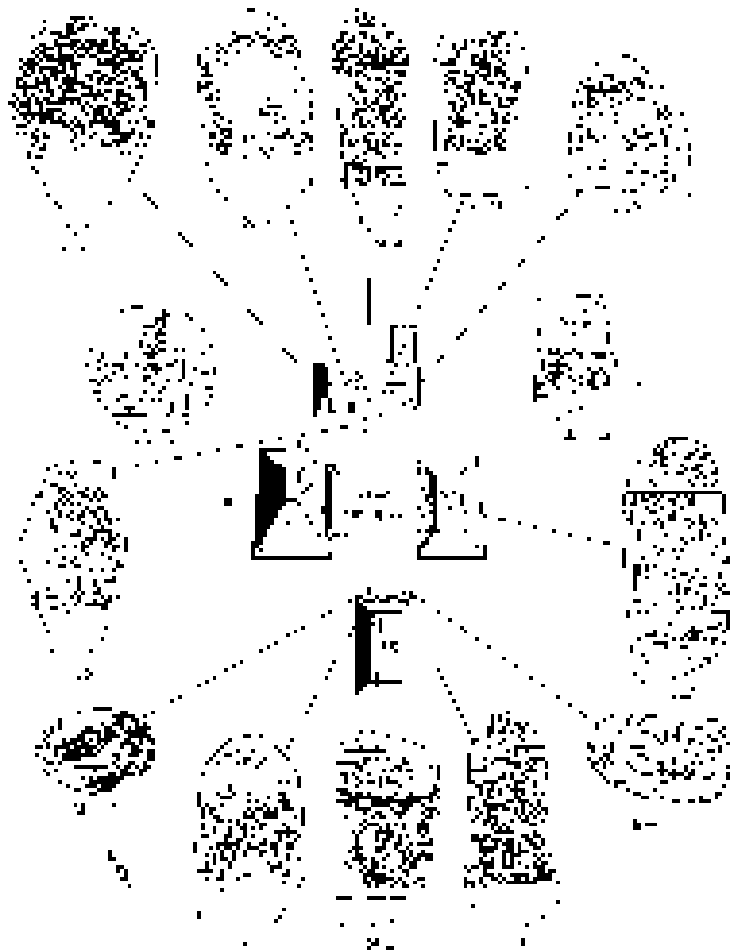


Figure 6.4. Schematic rendering of Group A at Izapa, showing location of major monuments. After Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: Fig. 8.1.

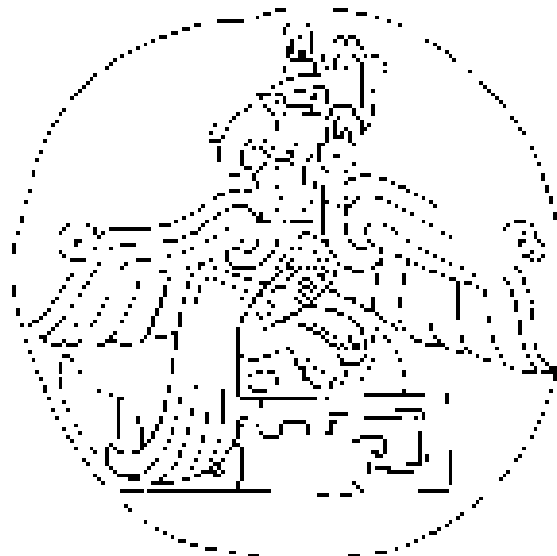


Figure 6.5. Izapa Altar 3. Drawing by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

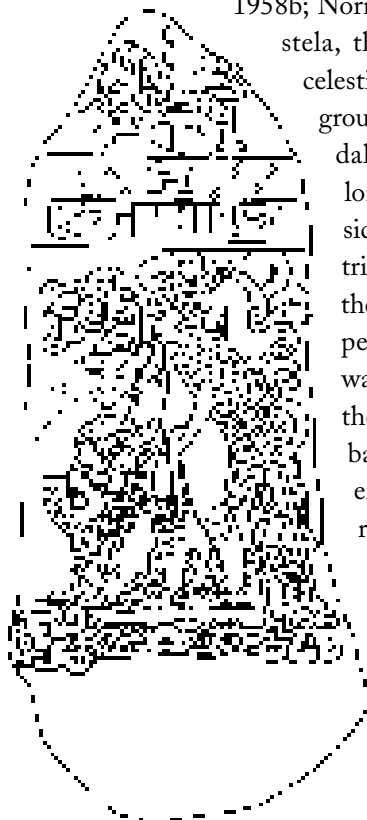


Figure 6.6. Izapa Stela 1. Drawing by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

1958b; Norman 1976: 197). At the top of the stela, the tree's branches reach up to a celestial band, while its roots rest on a ground line that is marked by pyramidal shapes containing double merlons, signs that have Middle Preclassic precedents and signify the terrestrial sphere (Reilly 1994: 226). Below the earth band is a series of volutes, perhaps denoting the primordial waters of creation that flow beneath the terrestrial layer. The watery basal band of Stela 5 may be a direct reference to the waters of the adjacent reservoir that originated in Group A. In fact, the image on Stela 5 may be a cosmic map of sorts that referenced the physical space of Izapa while simultaneously defining the site as the central axis of the universe. Inserted into this schema, and shaded by an umbrella held by an attendant, is a figure wearing the Jester God headband of rulership that may represent an Izapa ruler (Fields 1989: 25). On the opposite

side of the tree, two seated figures face each other over a brazier and enact some sort of ceremony.

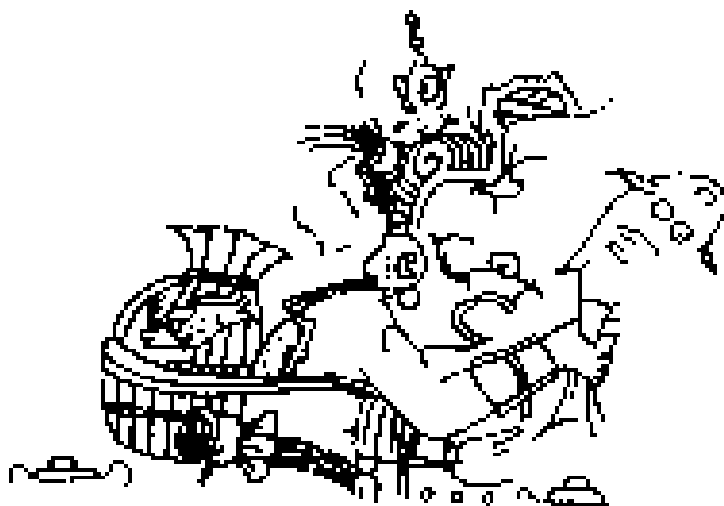


Figure 6.7. Detail of carved bone from Temple 1 at Tikal. Drawing by John Montgomery.

Stela 5 perhaps represents a quasi-historical scene that framed the activities of elite ritual practitioners within the symbolic landscape of creation.

Flanking Stela 2 at the opposite end of the Group A courtyard were Stelae 1 and 3 (fig. 6.4). Stela 1 (fig. 6.6) depicts a Late Preclassic version of the Maya deity Chaak, the god of rain and lightning (Girard 1966: 40; Norman 1976: 87; Taube 1992: 22). Marking his shins, and recalling those on the uppermost figure on Stela 60, are celts that indicate his divine nature (Taube 1996: 50). The watery basal band upon which the deity stands provides a counterpart to the waters on Stela 5, and may also allude to the actual water that flowed from Group A into the Mound 60 reservoir. This suggestion is supported by the location of Stela 1 adjacent to the drain at the southeastern corner of Mound 57.

Comparison of this Late Preclassic Chaak prototype to a Classic-period Chaak depicted on a carved bone from a tomb in Temple 1 at Tikal reveals many similarities (fig. 6.7) (Norman 1976: 89). On Izapa Stela 1, Chaak is shown fishing, replete with creel and woven basket. The Tikal Chaak also wears a creel on his back and appears to be fishing. Likewise, both versions of Chaak possess nearly identical topknots of hair, a feature that became diagnostic of Chaak during the Classic and Postclassic periods.⁴ As Taube (1992: 22) observed, a band of fluid, perhaps vomit, emanates from Chaak's mouth on Stela 1, and may anticipate later Classic Maya vessel scenes as well as expressions used by modern Yucatec shamans who metaphorically refer to rain as "vomit" in rainmaking ceremonies (cf. Sosa 1985: 386). During the Classic period, Chaak played a prominent role in the Maya creation story, appearing in vessel scenes in which the Maize God is transported to the place of his rebirth (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 93–94).

Izapa Stela 3 (fig. 6.8) stood to the west of Stelae 1 and 2 along the base of Mound 58. The figure depicted on Stela 3, identifiable as a deity by the celt strapped to his shin, bears some resemblance to Chaak, as he wields an object that anticipates the lightning ax often carried by Chaak dur-

ing the Classic period (Taube 1992: 17–27). However, the serpent that springs from, or in front of, his foot compares more closely to Classic-period representations of God K, a deity associated with elite power and dynastic descent.⁵ The allusions to Chaak on Stela 3 may have connoted the same associations with water and fertility that were referenced on Stela 1. At any rate, the depiction of these two deities on Stelae 1 and 3 informs the supernatural context of the other monuments in the courtyard and references themes of water, fertility, and the greater creation story.

At the northern end of the Group A plaza, the remaining monuments that abutted Mound 56 are too effaced (Stelae 7 and 26) or fragmentary (Altar 60) to offer further insight into the conceptual program of the Group A assemblage. However, directly in front of the low platform abutting Mound 56, aligned with Stela 4, was Stela 6 (fig. 6.9). Stela 6 depicts an enormous toad, readily identifiable as a *Bufo marinus* by the pitted parotid glands on its back, which burps forth an object from its open maw. This act of burping forth was synonymous in ancient Mesoamerica with the manifestation of visions. The combination of a *Bufo marinus* and a vision may be deliberate, as the venom of the toad is famed for its hallucinogenic properties and abilities to induce an altered state of consciousness (Furst 1981; Reilly 1989).⁶ The relationship between Stela 4 and Stela 6 may also have alluded to the use of *Bufo marinus* to facilitate the process of transformation visualized on Stela 4.

The imagery of Stela 6 also offers insight into the role of the toad altars, Altars 1 and 2, which stood at the base of Stelae 1 and 3 at the southern end of the courtyard (fig. 6.10).⁷ The word for “toad” in Mixe-Zoquean languages is *nakak*. Remarkably similar to this is the word *na’ka*, which signifies “flat object, table, slab of flat stone, or stage” in Oluta Popoluca and Lowland Mixe languages (Wichmann 1995: 396). Based on the tendency for wordplay in ancient Mesoamerican languages, the toad altars frequently paired with stelae may have connoted stages. Rising above these symbolic stages were the stelae. This dyad of toad altar and stela, then, may have signified the



Figure 6.8. Izapa Stela 3. Drawing by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.



Figure 6.9. Izapa Stela 6. Drawing by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.



Figure 6.10. Toad altars at Izapa: A, Altar 1 (drawing by author); B, Altar 2 (drawing by Ramiro Jimenez, courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation).

sculptural equivalent of a performer upon a stage (Guernsey Kappelman 2000). This suggestion dovetails with the arguments offered by Stuart (1996), who suggested that stelae functioned within the ritual landscape as surrogate ritual performers. It also makes sense in light of the discussion in Chapter 4, in which the images of gods portrayed on Classic Maya stelae were understood as the actual manifestation of those deities, not merely a representation. Assuming that compara-

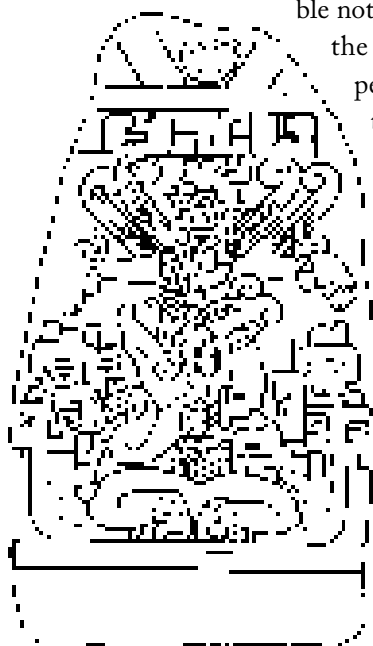


Figure 6.11. Izapa Stela 11. Drawing by Ajax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

ble notions of the divine existed during the preceding Late Preclassic period, it is reasonable to suggest that the toad altars at the bases of Stelae 1 and 3 provided a “stage” upon which the deities, portrayed on the stelae above them, “appeared.”

The imagery of Stela 6 (fig. 6.9) supports the notion that these toad altars, like their stela counterparts, were understood as active participants within ritual performances. On Stela 6 an enormous *Bufo marinus* toad represents a personified version of its Altar 1 and Altar 2 counterparts. Even more importantly, the Stela 6 toad actively functions as the vehicle through which

the vision or object is manifested: only through its participation is the ritual outcome achieved. Izapa Stela 11, in Group B, also attests to this phenomenon (fig. 6.11). On Stela 11 an individual emerges from the maw of a reptilian creature that once again bears the pitted parotid glands of the *Bufo marinus* toad. As on

Stela 6, the image portrays the personified toad altar as a participant within the ritual, here as the very vehicle through which the figure emerges. The imagery of Stela 11 may actually depict the kinds of rituals that were performed on the backs or adjacent to these toad altars. It also strongly suggests that the zoomorphic altars were more than just immobile lumps of stone, carved in the likeness of a toad: they were understood to be vibrant components of the Late Preclassic ritual environment.⁸

Given the significance of these altars, it is interesting to note that neither Stela 4 nor Stela 2, with their imagery of rulers performing in the costume of birds, possessed an altar at their base (fig. 6.4).⁹ However, when these two stelae are considered in relationship to the other monuments and the spatial configuration of the plaza, this apparent aberration is clarified. As will be recalled, Stela 4 stood on the small platform at the base of Mound 56, recessed farther back than the other stelae to its sides. It is the only stela in this grouping that lacks an altar. This makes sense in light of the fact that Stela 6 stood directly in front of it at the base of the pyramid: the imagery of Stela 6, which personified an altar or performance venue, substituted for a physical altar at the base of Stela 4. The imagery of Stela 6 may also have denoted the open



Figure 6.13. Panoramic view of Izapa Group A. Photos by Elizabeth Reese Baloutine.

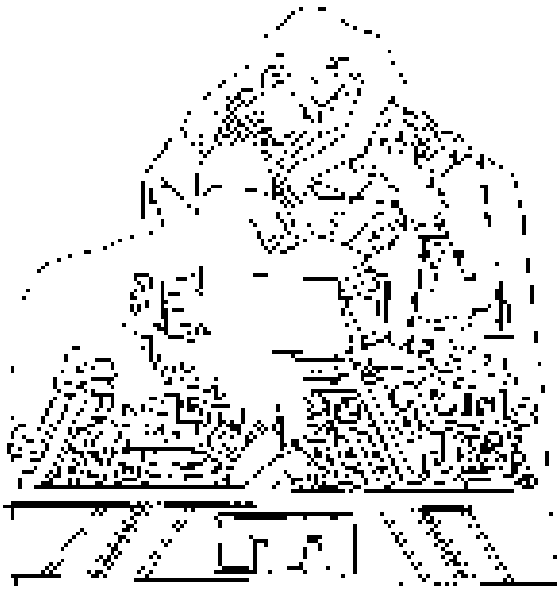


Figure 6.12. Izapa Stela 60. Drawing by Ayax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

platform space in front of Stela 4, which would have readily accommodated a performance like that depicted on Stela 4. Accordingly, Stela 4, the open platform at its base, Stela 6, and its own plain altar worked in concert with each other, sculpturally defining the space as a performance venue, and perhaps referencing the very rituals that took place within their midst.

Directly opposite this sculptural tableau, Stela 2 also lacked an altar.¹⁰ Yet, on either side of it stood Altars 1 and 2, with their three-dimensional representations of the *Bufo marinus* toad. The sculptural presence of these toads may have alluded to the space provided between them and in front of Stela 2, which was another likely spot for the performances of Izapa rulers. In fact, the entire plaza of Group A appears to have been defined, through the orchestration of stelae, sculpture, and architecture, as the place in which avian performances were choreographed (Guernsey Kappelman 2001). It is tempting to think of the quadrilateral plaza of Group A as a place that was ignited periodically with the performances of rulers who demonstrated their role as the earthly analog to Itzamnaaj, communicating directly with the supernatural in the persona of the Principal Bird Deity. One can also conjecture that Stela 60 (fig. 6.12), with its image of a transformed ruler perched in the celestial realm, originally had been a part of the Group A assemblage. Removed during the Early Classic period to Group F, its imagery closely corresponds to the theme of avian transformation that dominated the Group A courtyard.

In fact, the expansive Group A plaza seems, indeed, to have been conceived of as a perform-



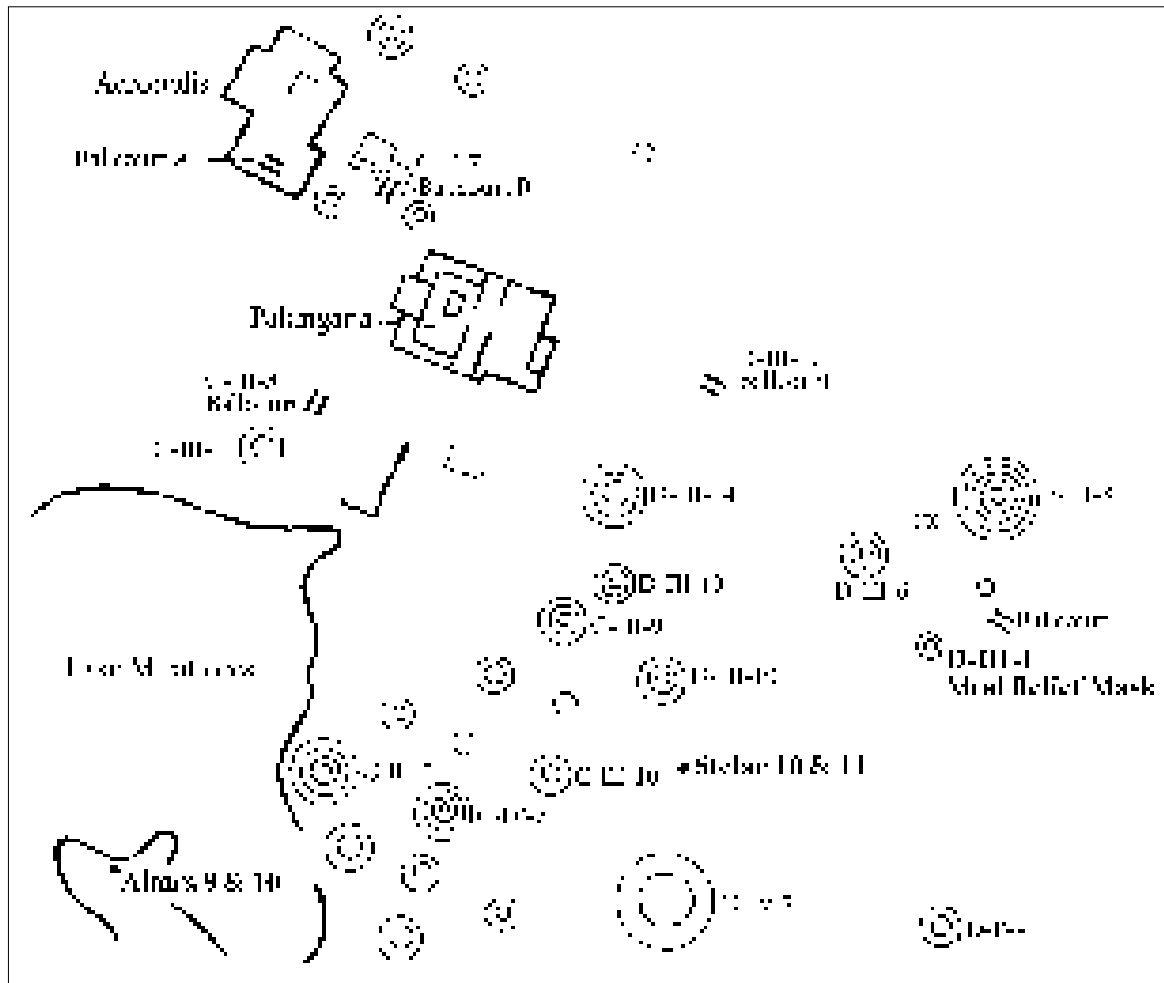


Figure 6.14. Map of a portion of Kaminaljuyu, showing location of monuments mentioned in the text. After Parsons 1986: Fig. 4.

ance venue (fig. 6.13). Its large confines would have readily accommodated an audience of significant size. Its sheer scale, in concert with the highly narrative imagery of the monuments, implies a sacred space that was charged with both the performances of Late Preclassic rulers costumed as birds and the responses of the audiences gathered within its midst.

Although, as stated earlier, Izapa provides the best venue in which to consider these Late Preclassic images of bird performers within their original context, the site of Kaminaljuyu offers some, albeit limited, opportunity for conjecture. Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 (fig. 5.1B) was discovered in 1957 by Edwin Shook between Mounds D-III-10 and D-IV-2, in the same pit from which Stela 10 had

been removed by Gustavo Espinosa two years earlier (fig. 6.14). Shook found Stela 11, fallen from its standing position, in situ beneath sealed floors that provided a concrete Late Preclassic date between 200 BC and AD 200.¹¹ The imagery of Stela 10 (fig. 1.5) is much more complex and opaque than that of Stela 11. It does, however, include some avian references, as in the winged cape worn by the standing figure on the left and the unique, inverted bird headdress worn by the disembodied head on the right. Could it be, based on the final context of these two monuments, that the plaza space between Mounds D-III-10 and D-IV-2 was where Kaminaljuyu rulers performed their versions of these avian rituals? While impossible to answer, since their original placement is

unknown, it is worth noting that bird imagery also appears on the modeled clay facade of Mound D-III-1, just to the northeast of this plaza. During the Early Classic Aurora phase (AD 200–400), Mound D-III-1 was decorated with a clay facade depicting a zoomorphic creature with hooked beak whose beaded headdress and central medallion correspond strikingly to those worn by Early Classic versions of the Principal Bird Deity (fig. 6.15).¹² Although Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 and the Mound D-III-1 masks were not contemporary, it is worth noting the possible continuity in the type of imagery associated with this portion of the site center during both the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods, albeit in radically different sculptural mediums.¹³

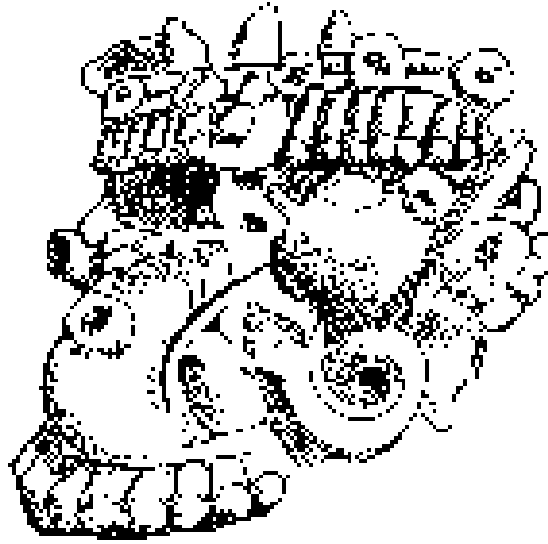


Figure 6.15. Mud-relief mask from Kaminaljuyu Mound D-III-1. Drawing by author after Cortez 1986: Fig. 46.

PRESERVING CONTINUITY: THE ROLE OF ASTRONOMY

Unfortunately, avian monuments from other sites, such as Stela 1 from La Mojarra or Altar 30 from Takalik Abaj, lend themselves even less to a contextual analysis given the lack of data on their original locations. In fact, Izapa provides a rare opportunity to consider a series of Late Preclassic monuments within their original architectural setting and reconstruct their significance within the ritual environment. Despite this situation, one fact remains strikingly clear: monuments depicting avian transformation were consistently erected throughout a wide territory during the Late Preclassic period that encompassed the Gulf Coast, Pacific piedmont, and Guatemalan Highlands. They functioned within the sacred landscape as part of a greater narrative tradition that inserted rulers into a mythic history; they also participated within a mode of monumental sculpture that defined them as actors, contextualized within the built environment and perpetually revitalized through ritual performance. Moreover, they provide insight into one means through which the office of rulership was consistently addressed during the Late Preclassic period across linguistic boundaries, and demonstrate the utilization of a consistent mythological vocabulary that invoked

both Itzamnaaj and his avian coessence, the Principal Bird Deity.

This is especially significant given the fact that such patterns of continuity do not always characterize ancient Mesoamerica. As Houston and Stuart (1996: 302) observed with regards to a discussion of Classic-period theology and the presence of localized cults, “A god revered at one site may partly share the name of a god at another, but we cannot presume an identity of ritual roles, meanings, or history of development.” The distribution of these Izapan style monuments of bird performers, as well as their consistent repertoire of motifs, however, provide a rare instance in which a specific and recurring deity complex appears to have been shared, with great continuity, across space and time, persevering throughout the duration of the Late Preclassic period. Furthermore, this deity complex appears to have formed a critical component of the public declaration and performance of rulership—enough so that these massive stelae, with their images of rulers engaged in avian transformation, were consistently erected at various site centers participating within this vibrant communication sphere. While there was a clearly expressed mythological rationale for these performances, as discussed in the previous chapter,

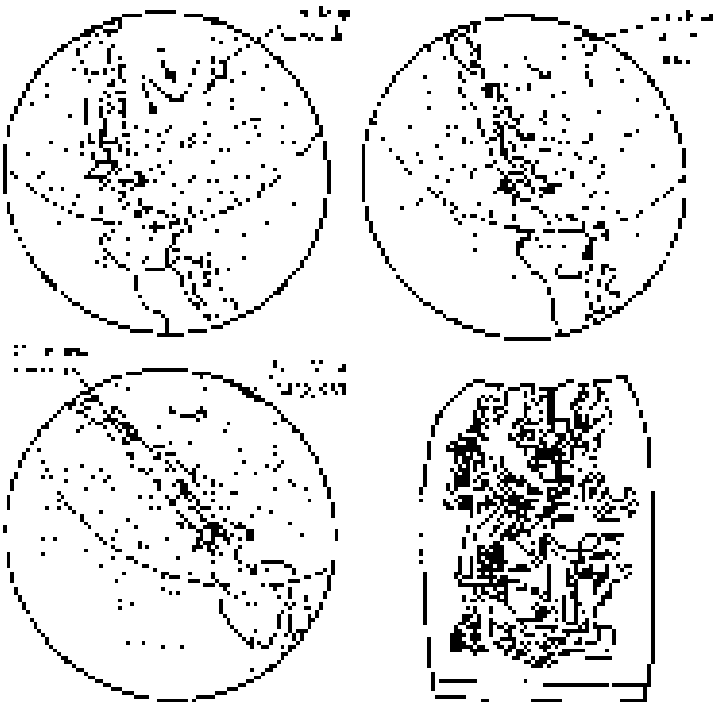


Figure 6.16. Izapa Stela 25 and sky maps at two-hour intervals as the Milky Way shifts into the crocodile tree conformation. After Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: Fig. 2:24.

were there other mechanisms that enabled this pattern of ritual to endure across time and space?

These dramas of avian impersonation did not unfold only in sacred site centers, but were also perpetually echoed on the storyboard of the night sky. As Schele (1992) demonstrated, the narrative of creation was visually played out each night in the movement of the constellations, planets, and Milky Way, which was understood as a giant World Tree, or *axis mundi*. One of the primary astronomical protagonists was Ursa Major, or the Big Dipper, which was identified by D. Tedlock (1985) as the stellar counterpart of the Principal Bird Deity. Based on this identification, Schele (1992) and Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993) correlated Late Preclassic- and Classic-period representations of the bird with its astronomical identity.

For example, Izapa Stela 25 depicts the confrontation between the Principal Bird Deity and the Hero Twin in both mythological and astronomical terms (fig. 6.16). Schele (1992: 138; see also Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: fig. 2.24)

identified the crocodilian tree as a symbolic representation of the Milky Way as it rotates from its north-south position into its diagonal conformation from northeast to southwest during the night. As the Milky Way shifts into its “Crocodile Tree” position, the Big Dipper sets on the northwest horizon. Simultaneously, as the Big Dipper disappears from view, Cassiopeia, another circumpolar constellation, emerges on the northeast horizon. Reese (1996) suggested that Cassiopeia was represented by a waterfowl, which on Stela 25 is perched in the branches of the tree, analogous to its position in the northeast at the top of the Milky Way. As the imagery of Stela 25 indicates, this astronomical configuration symbolized that moment from the creation story in which the Principal Bird Deity was confronted and eventually defeated by the Hero Twin. The “defeat” was played out astronomically by the gradual descent of the Big Dipper along the northwest horizon, at which point it literally disappeared into the black void that was centered around the northern pivot. However, by the next evening, the Big Dipper reappeared in the sky, confirming the nature of its perpetual circumpolar journey as a cycle of death and rebirth.

Looper and Guernsey Kappelman (2001) commented further on the serpentine cord disseminated by the bird on Izapa Stela 25, which compares to other Late Preclassic- and Classic-period images that depict the Principal Bird Deity in association with twisted ropes. On Izapa Stela 25, the serpentine cord descends from the body of the bird, entwines around the staff and the crocodilian World Tree, and terminates in the head of a serpent. As Miller (1974) first demonstrated, such twisting cords symbolized cosmic umbilici that connected humanity to the supernatural, celestial realm.¹⁴ During the Classic period, there was also a direct association between the twisted cords and the ecliptic, or path of the sun in the sky which, in the tropics, moved from a southern rising point in December, through its zenith position (when the sun passes directly overhead), to the northern solstice point in June, and then back southward (Looper and Guernsey Kappelman 2001: 11).

These movements of the sun were directly tied into agricultural cycles, as the first zenith passage closely corresponds to the arrival of the rainy season, while the second zenith passage signals the timing of the next planting among the Maya today (Girard 1966: 127). The Principal Bird Deity's frequent role as the disseminator of the cosmic cords in the iconography, as well as its identity as the circumpolar Big Dipper constellation in the north, ledLooper and Guernsey Kappelman (2001: 16) to suggest that the bird was viewed as the celestial "agent that pulled the ecliptic northward to the position that enabled the sun to reach zenith and the rain to fall." In other words, in addition to its mythic role as a denizen of the supernatural realm and the alter ego of the creator deity Itzamnaaj, the Principal Bird Deity also appears to carry consistent associations with the arrival of the rainy season and agricultural fertility. Its Classic-period name, *Itzamnaaj-ji Muut-ti*, connoted a similar range of meaning:

Indeed, the name of this bird includes the word *itzam*, which is based on the word *itz*, meaning "sap, dew, nectar" or other types of seeping liquid (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 410–412). The same root appears in the Yucatec term *yitzil ka'an*, which refers to a cosmological conduit of fluids that connects sky and earth (Sosa 1985: 435–436). The Principal Bird Deity's prominent flower diadem with flowing nectar also refers to this aspect. The name of the bird connotes its associations with earthly fructification—in particular, the flowering of the earth that follows the rains. (Looper and Guernsey Kappelman 2001: 17–18)

The significance of these arguments rests on the premise that astronomy was not only one means through which mythic sequences unfolded but was also a unifying mechanism that related cosmic characters and their movements to fundamental seasonal and agricultural patterns (B. Tedlock 1985, 1999). Moreover, the night sky, with its cast of characters—some of whom appeared every

night, and others whose appearance was correlated to specific seasons—provided one mechanism through which mythic narratives remained consistent across time and space. Indeed,Looper (1995a: 22) commented upon the importance of astronomy to Classic Maya iconographic systems, concluding that astronomy functioned as a "symbolic referent [that] was responsible for much of the stability of ancient Maya iconography, given that it remained virtually unchanged for millennia."¹⁵ Given the relatively constant appearance of the night sky across southeastern Mesoamerica during the Late Preclassic period, it is no wonder that the myth of the Principal Bird Deity was repeatedly invoked by rulers: their ritual actions were not limited to the surface of the earth, but were reflected each night in the movements of the constellations. The performances of rulers quite literally reverberated through the terrestrial and celestial realms, an effect that could not have been lost upon most audiences.

In fact, the effect upon the audience warrants further attention. The vast majority of individuals during the Late Preclassic period were undoubtedly illiterate. Hieroglyphic inscriptions would have had little impact on anyone other than an elite, or well-educated, visitor to a site. However, the narratives portrayed on the Izapa monuments—and likely reenacted in the ceremonial plazas—would have been recognizable to anyone familiar with the movement of the stars and Milky Way. Surely agriculturalists were well versed in the movements of the constellations, whose appearances were directly linked to the arrival of seasonal cycles and rains. Likewise, the night sky and its many characters must have been invoked around cooking fires late into the night, when stories, histories, and myths were shared by people at all levels of society. While the monuments from Izapa Group A that feature the Principal Bird Deity allude to these notions, the sculptural assemblage from Group B confirms the fact that astronomical metaphors—readily accessible to people from all echelons of society—were appropriated by Late Preclassic rulers for their own ends. Ultimately, the only way to fully comprehend the role of the Prin-

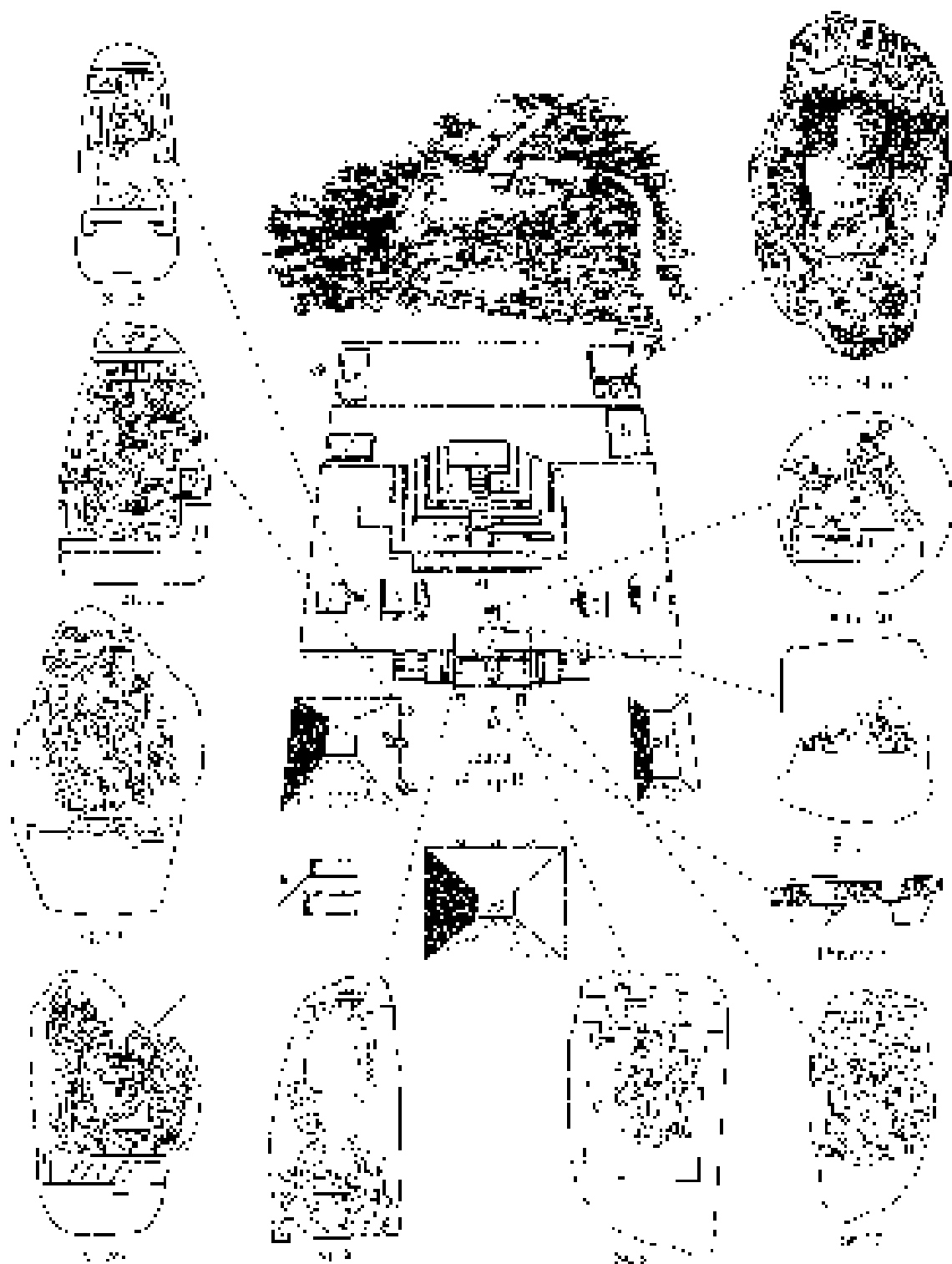


Figure 6.17. Schematic rendering of Group B at Izapa, showing location of major monuments. After Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: Fig. 9.1.

cial Bird Deity as an actor within a larger Late Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerican cosmovision is to consider how, through its attributes and associations, it successfully fused mythological concepts with references to the natural world.¹⁶

THE GROUP B VENUE AT IZAPA

Group B at Izapa occupied the northeastern corner of the central ritual precinct of Izapa, adjacent to the Río Izapa (figs. 6.1 and 6.17). Like Group A, Group B was another quadrilateral plaza, bound on the north by the large Mound 30 acropolis.¹⁷ Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 184) dated the final platform modifications to the late Guillen phase, although the central Mound 30a pyramid may have been modified during the Early Classic period.¹⁸ As mentioned previously, Groups A and B together contained the highest concentration of sculpture and appear to have been the locus of ritual activity throughout the Late Preclassic period.

Dominating the sculptural assemblage of Group B and standing as sentinels before the low platform at the southern base of Mound 30 were three monumental stone pillars in a triadic arrangement.¹⁹ Each of the three pillars, which ranged in height from 115 to 135 centimeters, bore on its top a stone sphere (fig. 6.18). The stone spheres, each with a diameter of sixty to seventy centimeters, were flattened at their base to accommodate positioning on top of the pillars. Moving from the center of the plaza in order to ascend one of two sets of narrow staircases on Mound 30, one would have had to skirt this arrangement of pillars. As Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 184) noted, the paired staircases and sculptural assemblage at the base of the low central platform in front of Mound 30 would have readily accommodated ritual processions.

Taube (1998: 439) first noted that this triadic assemblage at Izapa foreshadows similar designs in Classic Maya monumental and domestic architecture. For the Classic Maya, the triad represented the three-stone hearth, a symbol that marked the heart, or center, of the universe.²⁰ As a metaphor



Figure 6.18. Monumental stone pillars in Group B at Izapa. Photo by author.

for the cosmic hearth, the monumental pillars constituted a powerful aesthetic trope that provided the fundamental structuring principle and contextual environment for the monuments and ritual performances contained within Group B. It also resonated within the greater ceremonial landscape, echoing Mound 60, the symbolic mountain of creation that marked the center of Izapa and emerged from the primordial waters at its base. This theme of centrality, given monumental form in Mound 60 and reiterated through this invocation of the cosmic hearth in Group B, identified Izapa as the pivot of the world. It also evidences at Izapa the incorporation of several prominent Mesoamerican aesthetic tropes that would have been recognized by people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Carrasco (1987: 129) described the importance of acts of centering within the construction of Mesoamerican, and particularly Aztec, sites:

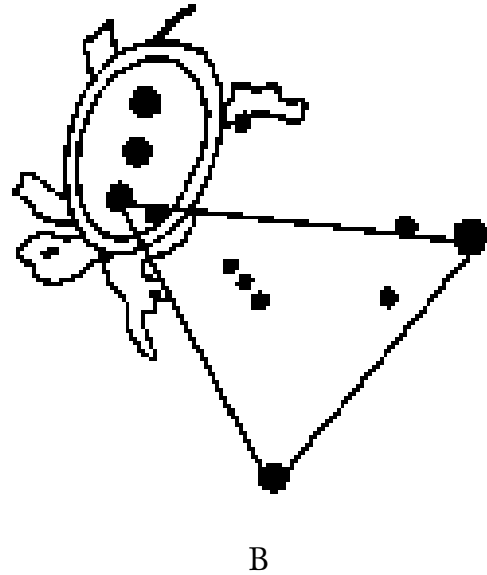
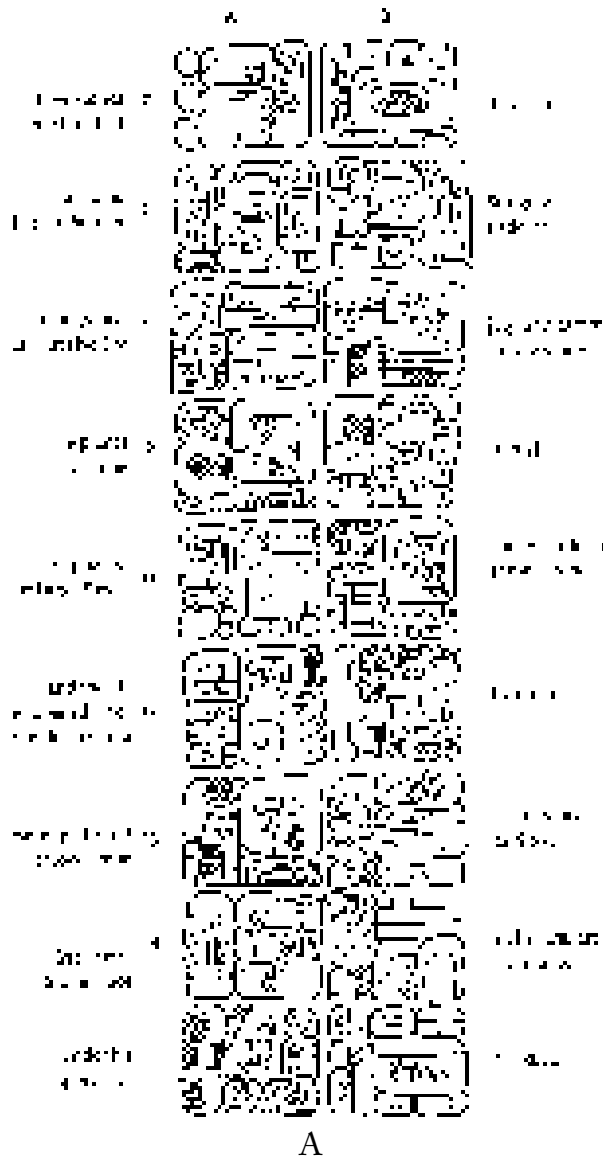


Figure 6.19. The three stones of creation: A, Hieroglyphic text from Quirigua Stela C (drawing by MatthewLooper); B, The three stones in the constellation Orion (drawing by Linda Schele. © David Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.).

[T]he ancient ideal type city was a sacred space oriented around a quintessentially sacred center in the form of a temple or temple pyramid. This pivot of the community partook of the “symbolism of the center,” meaning that it was believed to be the center of the world, the point of intersection of all the world’s paths, both terrestrial and celestial. The central structure was an axis mundi, “regarded as the meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell,” or “the point of ontological transition between the spheres.”

. . . Another aspect of urban sacred space was manifest when a ceremonial center, or one or more of its major buildings, represented through the image, design, and interrelationship of parts a cosmological concept or mythological episode. In this instance, a correspondence between stone image and celestial action was achieved in the appearance of a ceremonial building.

Carrasco's insights are readily applicable to Izapa. The motif of the three stones operated as a monumental hearth or centering device within the site center and also participated within a specific mythological episode from the creation story. This is best illustrated through a discussion of evidence from the Maya heartland.

A Classic-period inscription on Stela C from the site of Quirigua records the setting of three stones (fig. 6.19A). This action was one of the initial events of creation that laid the foundation for the formulation of the present universe (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 79–84;Looper 1995a: 156–165, 1995b; Schele 1992: 122–126). Notably,

both the phrasing of this text and imagery from other Classic Maya sites imply an association between the “stones” and “thrones,” and allude to the function of the stone thrones as cosmologically charged symbols of authority and order (Looper 1995b, 2003). The inscription also identifies one of the characters involved in the setting of the stones as Itzamnaaj.

Like the narrative of the Principal Bird Deity, that of the three stones was also paralleled in the night sky. In astronomical terms, the hearth referred to the triadic arrangement of three stars in the constellation Orion; at their center, the M-42 nebula symbolized the “smoke” of the hearth’s fire (fig. 6.19B) (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 79; B. Tedlock 1999: 49; D. Tedlock 1985: 261). As attested by a detail in the Postclassic Madrid Codex, the three stones were believed to travel through the night sky on the back of a turtle (fig. 6.20A). The turtle, in turn, was the place of the Maize God’s rebirth, as depicted on a Classic Maya plate (fig. 6.20B) (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 79–82; Schele 1992: 134).

Accordingly, the triadic arrangement of stone-capped pillars in Group B at Izapa not only declared in powerful cosmological terms that Izapa was the center of the universe, but also signified the celestial hearth from which the Maize God would be reborn. Moreover, this schema was conceptually linked to the thematic program of Group A, as it was the deity Itzamnaaj who set the third stone of creation in preparation for this great event.

As Carrasco (1987: 129) described, centering devices functioned as points of ontological transition between the levels of the universe. The role of the hearthstones in marking a place of intersection between the supernatural realm and the human sphere is well attested at Izapa. In fact, the sculptural assemblage in Group B reveals that messages of rulership—or authority in the terrestrial sphere—were articulated in conjunction with the cosmological schema of the three hearthstones. Izapa Throne 1 sat immediately in front of the center pillar of the three stones of creation in Group B (figs. 6.17 and 6.21a). When seated upon this throne, the ruler became—physically and fig-

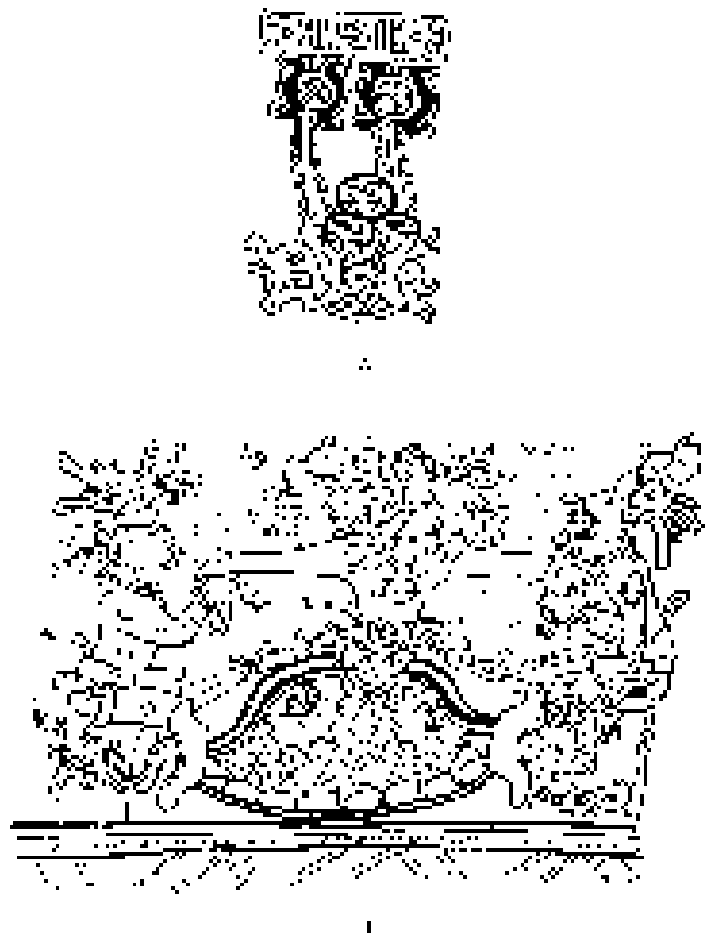


Figure 6.20. The three stones and Maize God imagery from the Maya region: A, Postclassic Madrid Codex (drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.); B, Classic Maya vessel scene of the rebirth of the Maize God (drawing by author).

uratively—the pivot of the cosmic hearth. From this vantage point, he not only commanded the political landscape but also symbolically reenacted the founding events of the present creation, continually “resetting” the three stones in an act congruent with that of Itzamnaaj and the other deities at the dawn of creation. Furthermore, the throne itself restated the metaphoric nature of the *stones* of creation as the *thrones* of creation, through which the seat of rulership was given cosmological legitimacy. By invoking the fundamental aesthetic trope of the three stones of creation, the sculptural programming of Group B provided a dramatic cosmological context for political display.

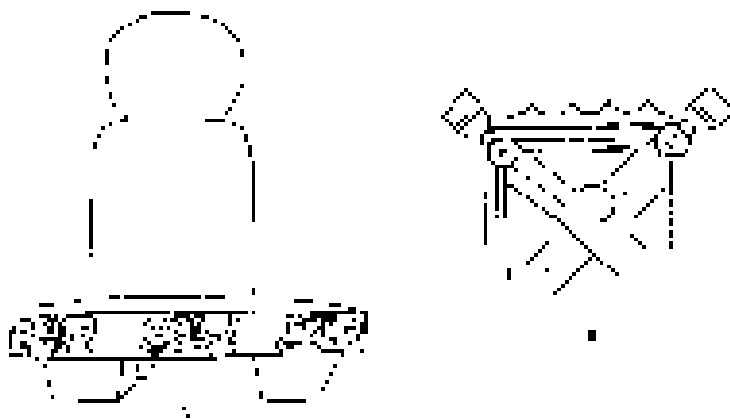


Figure 6.21. Throne 1 from Group B at Izapa: A, In front of Miscellaneous Monuments 5 and 6; B, Top cartouche. Drawings by author.

The incised designs of Throne 1 reiterated the supernatural significance of the ruler's actions as he sat on the throne at the center of creation

(Guernsey Kappelman 1997). The top of Throne 1 bears a cartouche with scalloped edges and centrally infixed crossed bands that symbolize a portal to the Otherworld (fig. 6.21B). When seated within the cartouche on top of the throne, the Izapa ruler became the conduit that linked the earthly world to the supernatural realm. Confirmation of this exists on Izapa Stela 8 (fig. 6.22), which stood at one corner of the small rectangular platform at the base of Mound 30 in Group B. As both Norman (1976: 105) and Taube (1998: 439) observed, the ruler on Stela 8 is seated on a throne whose profile exactly reproduces that of Throne 1, within a quatrefoil cartouche that

Figure 6.22. Izapa Stela 8. Drawing by Ajax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

marks the back of an enormous zoomorphic creature. Directly above the quatrefoil on Stela 8 is a scalloped portal that corresponds to the portal on Throne 1. These correlations strongly suggest that the imagery of Stela 8 visually recorded the actions

performed by the Izapa ruler as he sat on Throne 1, entered the cosmic portal, and conjured the powers of the universe.

Altar 20 (fig. 6.23), which was placed on the Mound 30 platform directly in line with Throne 1 on the plaza floor below, further substantiates that the thematic programs of Groups A and B were conceptually related. It depicts an individual whose face is visible beneath the beaked headdress of a bird. Although the face of the individual is human, the body is fully avian, and the figure clasps a round object in its talons. The avian figure hovers in the air above a basal band like that on Izapa Stela 4 and Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, which indicates that the action depicted occurred in the terrestrial sphere. The human facing the bird extends his hands, as if the round object carried by the bird is being exchanged between them. Importantly, the action portrayed on Altar 20, which involves a round object, parallels the actions referenced below on the plaza floor, in which three stones were set in place as part of the creation story. Furthermore, the imagery of Altar 20 inserts an avian impersonator into this narrative, forming a conceptual bridge between the thematic programs of Groups B and A.



Figure 6.23. Izapa Altar 20. Drawing by Ajax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

The theme of creation that unfolded in Group B was echoed by other monuments at Izapa, such as Stelae 22 and 67. These two stelae, with their remarkably similar compositions, were relocated to Group F at some point during the Early Classic period, during which time the center of Izapa was abandoned and activity shifted to the northern sector of the site.²¹ Stelae 22 and 67 both feature scenes in which an Izapa ruler performs the passage from the creation narrative in which the Maize God was transported to the cosmic hearth, where he would be reborn from the back of a turtle (Guernsey Kappelman 2002; Taube 1996: 62). As such, their imagery works in concert with the monumental stones in the Group B courtyard, elaborating upon this central myth from the creation story. They also further illuminate the performative roles of Izapa rulers, providing a counterpart to the imagery of Group A that featured rulers enacting specific segments of the creation story.

Izapa Stela 67 (fig. 6.24) depicts the transportation of an individual, with arms outstretched and hands clasping scepters, in a rectilinear, lidded, and canoelike object that floats above a watery band. Framing the figure is a scalloped cartouche or portal, and a long cord wraps around the base of the rectilinear device. The posture of the figure on Izapa Stela 67 anticipates Classic Maya portrayals of the Maize God's rebirth from a turtle carapace, while the small figures who grasp the cords on either side of him correspond to the Hero Twins that often flank the Maize God in Classic Maya scenes (see fig. 6.20B) (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Quenon and Le Fort 1997; Taube 1985, 1996).

The Classic Maya narrative of the Maize God's rebirth consisted of four primary episodes: his birth, costuming, transportation in a canoe, and ultimate resurrection (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Quenon and Le Fort 1997). These episodes could be conflated into composite scenes that incorporated several different events simultaneously, as on a Classic Maya vessel that depicts the birth of the Maize God from a piscine creature at the lower right, his costuming by two nude women at the left, and his transportation in a canoe at the

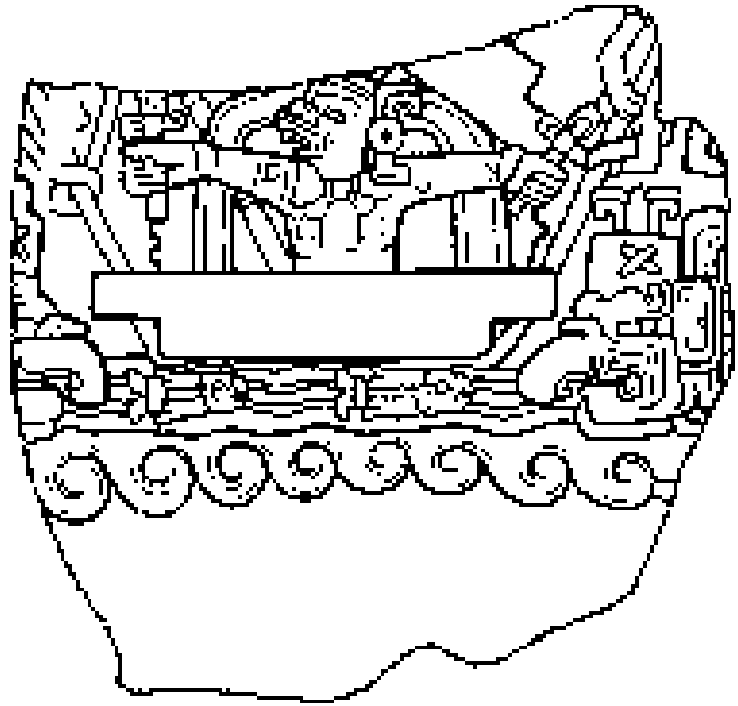


Figure 6.24. Izapa Stela 67. Drawing by Ajax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

top right (fig. 6.25A). Other objects, like the incised bones from Tikal Burial 116, focus on a single episode, such as the transportation of the Maize God in a canoe to the place of his rebirth (fig. 6.25B) (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 89–92; Quenon and Le Fort 1997: 885–891). The canoe in these Classic-period images is paralleled in the Izapa composition by the rectilinear object that floats in a watery basal band; in fact, its shape closely resembles the canoe depicted on the vase in the Museo Popol Vuh in Guatemala City (fig. 6.25A).

In contrast to these Classic-period examples that featured the performance of the Maize God within the creation narrative, the protagonist on Izapa Stela 67 appears to be an Izapa ruler acting in the guise and role of this deity, rather than the Maize God himself. The central figure on Stela 67 clasps scepters of rulership in his hands in a gesture of authority and wears a buccal mask and beard, costume paraphernalia often worn by Late Preclassic elite ritual practitioners within the context of a performance.²² Significantly, this imagery



Figure 6.25. Classic Maya scenes of the Maize God narrative: A, Vase from the Museo Popol Vuh (drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.); B, Incised bone from Tikal Burial 116 (drawing by John Montgomery).

on Izapa 67 anticipates the many Classic-period images of rulers performing in the guise of the Maize God and reenacting passages from the creation narrative, such as those on El Perú Stela 34 and Copán Stela H (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 277; Quenon and Le Fort 1997; Taube 1996).

While Izapa Stela 67 features an Izapa ruler reenacting the events of creation in the persona of the Maize God, it also alludes to more than one episode from the Maize God story by framing the performer against an enormous cartouche with scalloped edges. This cartouche on Stela 67 represents the Izapa version of a portal and compares to the one that decorated the tops of Izapa Throne 1 and Stela 8. Comparison to an altar from El Perú (fig. 6.26), which depicts a Classic Maya ruler enthroned within a cartouche that is carried on the back of a zoomorphic beast, helps to elucidate the significance of this compositional device (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 215; Taube 1998: 441). The inscription on the El Perú Altar describes the cartouche as *tu yol ak*, “at the heart of the turtle” or

“in the portal of the turtle” (Linda Schele, personal communication 1997), thereby placing the image of the ruler within the context of the Maize God’s rebirth. By analogy, Izapa Stela 67, Stela 8, and Throne 1 must also be understood against the backdrop of the creation story. The scalloped cartouches into which the Izapa rulers passed were not only metaphoric representations of cosmic portals, but powerful references to the creation narrative of the Maize God’s rebirth: the Izapa rulers on Stelae 67 and 8 were equivalent to the Maize God (Guernsey Kappelman 2002).

Izapa Stela 22 (fig. 6.27) provides a counterpoint to this narrative of the Maize God’s rebirth by subtly referencing the sacrificial death of the Maize deity, an act that necessarily preceded his eventual resurrection. As on Stela 67, the figure on Stela 22 travels in a canoe through a watery realm marked by swimming fish. Importantly, however, the two zoomorphic heads that bound the waters on Stela 22 possess skeletal jaws, in marked contrast to the fleshy jaws of the zoomorphs on Stela 67. Furthermore, the individual on Stela 22 does not wield the scepters of rulership, nor is he framed by the scalloped portal that symbolized rebirth. The imagery of Izapa Stela 22, like that of

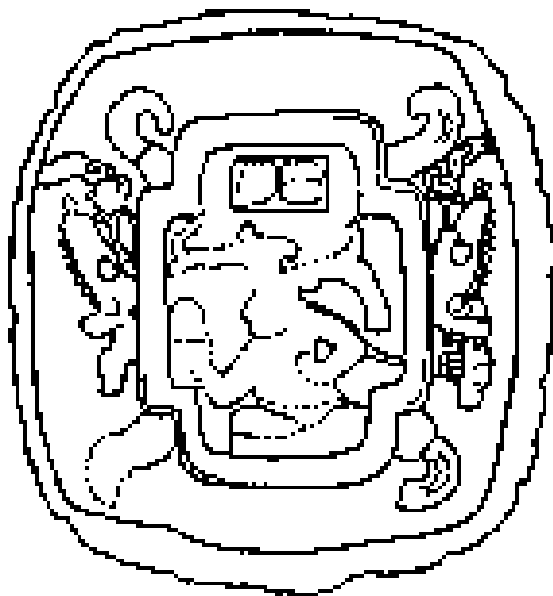


Figure 6.26. Classic Maya altar from El Perú. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

its counterpart Stela 67, presages Classic-period scenes that depict the death of the Maize God. Taube (1985: 176) described the disembodied heads of the Maize God often featured at the center of Late Classic plates as symbols of the harvested maize, cut from the stalk. The scene on Stela 22 also compares to the carved imagery featured on several of the Tikal bones, which features the sinking of the Maize God's canoe into the watery realm of the Underworld, a metaphoric representation of his passage into death (fig. 6.28). Like these Classic-period examples, Izapa Stela 22 alludes to the sacrificial overtones of the creation narrative, yet conflates this message with that of the Maize God's transportation to the three hearthstones and place of rebirth.

The imagery of Izapa Stelae 22 and 67 thus encompassed both the sacrifice and rebirth of the Maize God. It also embodied the reciprocal relationship between creation and death that was predicated on the life cycle of maize and endowed with narrative form through the myth of the Maize God (Guernsey Kappelman 2002; cf. Miller and Samayoa 1998; Taube 1985). Moreover, like its counterparts in Group A, Stelae 67 portrayed the kinds of rituals that were undoubtedly performed within the ceremonial centers of Late Preclassic sites in which a ruler enacted passages from the creation story.²³ By equating his actions to those of the Maize God, a ruler defined himself as the guarantor of world order and provider of continued agricultural prosperity.

Although the original contexts of Stelae 22 and 67 are unknown, one can speculate that during the Late Preclassic period they were part of the sculptural assemblage at the heart of the site. With their aquatic emphasis, they would have fit well into

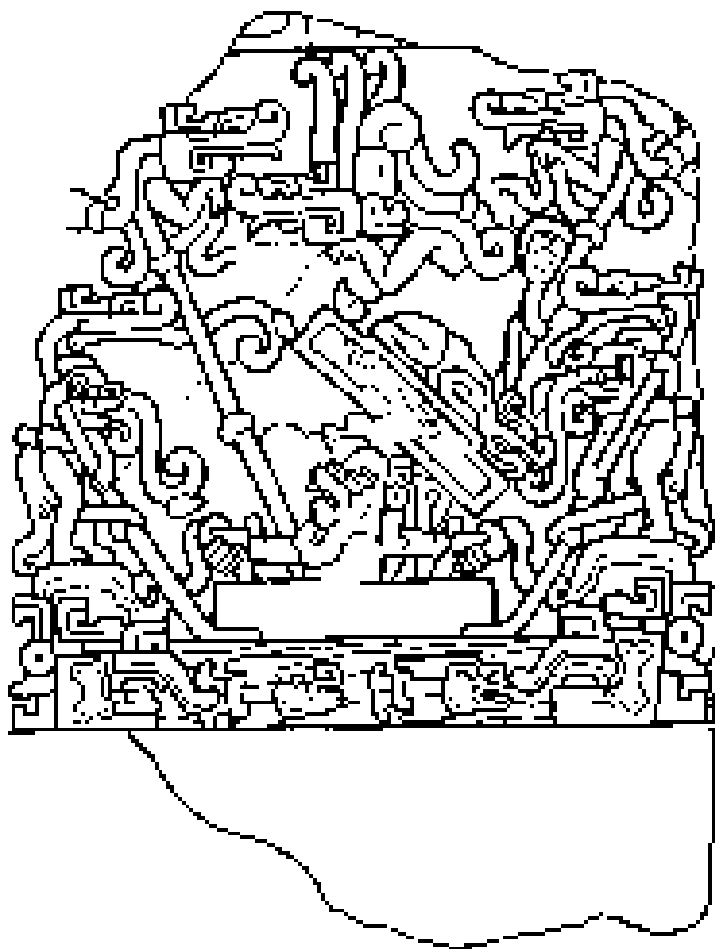


Figure 6.27. Izapa Stela 22. Drawing by Ajax Moreno. Courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation.

Group A or to the north of Mound 60, where dams and aqueducts channeled water through the ceremonial center to the Río Izapa. Alternatively, their invocation of the passage from the creation narrative in which the Maize God was transported to the place of resurrection would have fit seamlessly into the conceptual program of Group B,



Figure 6.28. Incised bone from Tikal Burial 116. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

which gave sculptural form to the three hearth-stone place of the Maize God's rebirth. Either location, albeit speculative, would have complemented the thematic program of Izapa's central precinct and invoked a striking harmony between the imagery recorded on the monuments, the rituals that surely took place within the courtyards, and the architecturally defined landscape of creation.

CONCLUSIONS

The Late Preclassic site of Izapa manifested the landscape of creation, defined through an intricate web of sculpture, architecture, and performance. Within this environment, the very presence of rulers and their ritual actions became part of a divinely sanctioned protocol. Their actions also reverberated on both an immediate level and an eternal one, projecting messages into the present and future that echoed from the distant and primordial past. Through these performances, Late Preclassic rulers reenacted the deeds of the gods and invoked key passages from the creation story that provided a cosmic charter for their actions and words. Such an environment also provided an appropriate theater in which rulership and its cosmic foundations were dramatized (cf. Ashmore 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Geertz 1980; Wheatley 1971). To paraphrase the words of Geertz (1980: 13), the performances of Late Preclassic rulers at Izapa became paradigmatic, actively structuring social order instead of merely reflecting it.

The monuments, too, were a fundamental part of this structuring, perpetually reasserting these themes of cosmic and political order through both their imagery and their continual reactivation via ritual performances. They also, as Clancy (1999: 126) astutely observed, engaged their audience through their very forms and complex compositions, which demanded that viewers move closer, scrutinize their surfaces, and then actively incorporate the memory of the previous monument in order to decipher the full meaning of the next, and of the assemblage as a whole. Only through the engagement of the viewer—within an architec-

turally and sculpturally defined context in which the ritual moment and greater narrative framework were brought to life—could meaning be fully achieved. In Clancy's (1999: 127) words, "[T]he public was drawn into civic life by becoming actors in the ceremonies and dramas of the plaza. They were not a mute audience passively receiving dogma."

Given the thematic programming of the central precinct at Izapa, one can imagine the types of ritual circuits that were enacted within its confines. Having arrived at the site from the paved ramp off the Río Izapa, one might have ascended the path to the Group G plaza to be greeted by the finely constructed Mound 61 building, silhouetted against Mound 60, Izapa's version of the mountain of creation rising from the primordial sea (fig. 6.29). From this vantage point, the message would have been clear: with each step, the landscape of creation was dramatically unfolding. Perhaps from there one would have continued into the wide plaza of Group B, which was thematically defined by the presence of the three stones of creation (fig. 6.1). This aesthetic trope provided a general structure—ideological, spatial, and sculptural—in which performances of rulership and reenactments of events from the creation narrative were contextualized and given meaning. Departing the Group B courtyard, one entered the plaza of Group H, dominated by its invocation of the primordial waters and sustenance mountain, which in turn was visually paralleled by the volcano Tacaná to the north. Low Mound 46, located on the banks of the reservoir, might have functioned as a dance platform where an Izapa ruler could perform, framed once more against the backdrop of creation. Skirting the waters around Mound 60, the ritual circuit might have concluded in Group A. There, the monuments suggest that the plaza space was enlivened by the avian performances of an Izapa ruler, who defined himself as the analog to the original shaman and prototypical ruler Itzamnaaj. The particular associations of sacred space at Izapa were fluid, transforming with each step of the actor within the greater boundaries of the ceremonial center. Izapa provided, to para-

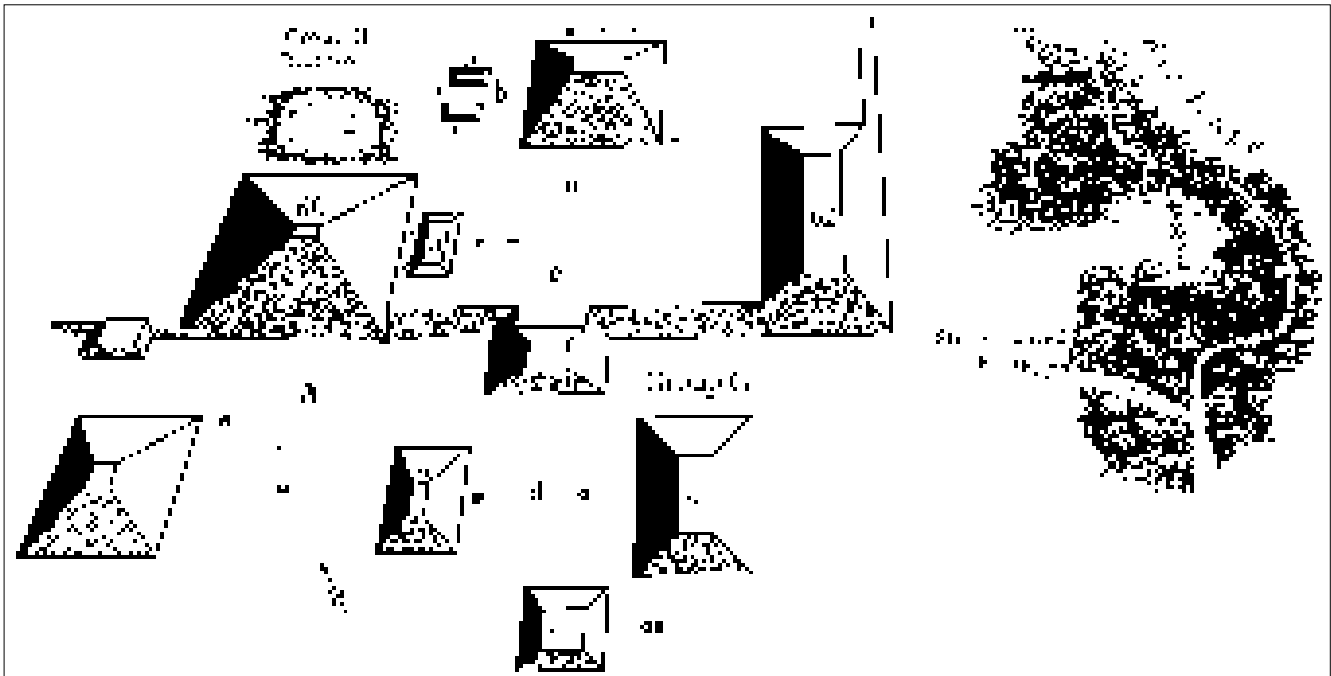


Figure 6.29. The eastern periphery of Izapa, showing possible entrance to site from the bank of the Río Izapa. After Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: Fig. 14.1.

phrase Carrasco (1991: 33), “a vision of place in which change and transformation [were] the sustained pattern.”

At Izapa the open plazas, architecture, and sculpture also formed part of a greater cultural structure, or poetics, which defined the nature of the Late Preclassic cosmos and the role of the ruler as a mediating force between the supernatural and terrestrial realms. The conjunction of these various elements—some tangible, others more elusive—reveals a public discourse that articulated societal order while simultaneously legitimating the power of the Late Preclassic ruling elite. Yet, these various ingredients of space, building, stela, altar, performer, and audience did not function independently, but within a web of exchange, vitalized by

their own formal, symbolic, and conceptual dependence on each other.

The final and concluding chapter departs from more-conceptual concerns of sacred space and myth and moves in the direction of economics. As has been stated repeatedly throughout this book, Late Preclassic statements of authority—as articulated, for example, in the monuments of avian performance—were predicated on a variety of forces: mythological, cosmological, political, and social. Importantly, the imagery of avian performance strongly suggests that economics also figured dramatically into this complex equation. Chapter 7 is thus an attempt to weave yet another important thread into the evolving tapestry of Late Formative Mesoamerica.

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BEYOND RITUAL

Macaws, Men, and Matrices of Exchange

Clothed in yellow, red, and green,
I chat before the King and Queen;
Of neither house nor land possessed,
By lords and knights I am caressed.

—*From Animal Nursery Rhymes, compiled by Angela Wilkes 1992*

While the previous chapters concentrated on the mythological and conceptual underpinnings of recurring Late Preclassic avian imagery, there are numerous clues—iconographic, archaeological, and mythological—suggesting that this emphasis on avian transformation was linked to an intricate web of economic and political factors. Building on these clues, this chapter explores the possible economic ramifications of these rituals that figured so prominently in the monumental record of the period. To proceed, however, it is necessary to point out that this exploration of the possible economic significance of these performances rests on the assumption that Late Preclassic rulers were costuming themselves specifically as macaws or, in other words, that the Late Preclassic Izapan style Principal Bird Deity was a macaw—and probably, even more specifically, a Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*) (fig. 7.1). Although, as discussed in Chapter 5, the specific natural model for the bird appears to have varied according to region and time period, it is worthwhile at least to explore the possibility that the patterns of avian transformation that we see in the Late Preclassic iconographic record were conceptually—and pragmatically—linked to patterns of exchange that hinged

on the unique value placed on macaws and their brightly colored feathers.

An essay by Pohl (2001) on the economic implications of Scarlet Macaw imagery, mythology, and remains throughout northern Mexico and the American Southwest serves as an excellent point of departure for this discussion. In these northerly regions (fig. 7.2), the brightly colored feathers of the Scarlet Macaw were highly prized and very rare due to the fact that the macaw's natural habitat did not extend north of coastal Oaxaca and northern Veracruz/southern Tamaulipas.¹ A 1536 report by Cabeza de Vaca in which he recorded that groups living south of the modern-day states of New Mexico and Arizona “traded parrot’s feathers for green stones far in the North” may, indeed, be the first historical reference to the trade of macaw feathers in this region.² By 1716 this practice was attested to in an account by Padre Luís Velarde, who stated that “at San Javier del Bac and neighboring *rancherías*, there are many macaws, which the Pimas raise because of the beautiful feathers of red and of other colors, . . . which they strip from these birds in the spring, for their adornment.”³ In fact, a Pima legend, cited by Pohl (2001: 95), records a type of parrot, most



Figure 7.1. Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*). Painting by Rita Ford Guernsey.

likely a Scarlet Macaw, whose insatiable appetite for turquoise was a metaphor for a pattern of economic exchange throughout the American Southwest in which macaws and their feathers were traded for turquoise.

Even earlier, at least by AD 1000 and perhaps already by AD 750, archaeological evidence in the American Southwest attests to the practice of macaw importation, particularly in the Mimbres region of modern New Mexico (Creel and McKusick 1994), where the birds and their feathers were exchanged in return for turquoise (Neitzel 1989: 540). Evidence there not only takes the form of numerous depictions of macaws—and specifically Scarlet Macaws—on pottery (fig. 7.3), but is also manifested in ritual interments of macaw skeletal remains.⁴ This Mimbres region data predates the abundant evidence from Casas Grandes for macaw breeding and raising by at least 500 years, and post-Conquest documentation by early Spanish explorers of trade in macaw feathers by Puebloan groups (Creel and McKusick 1994:

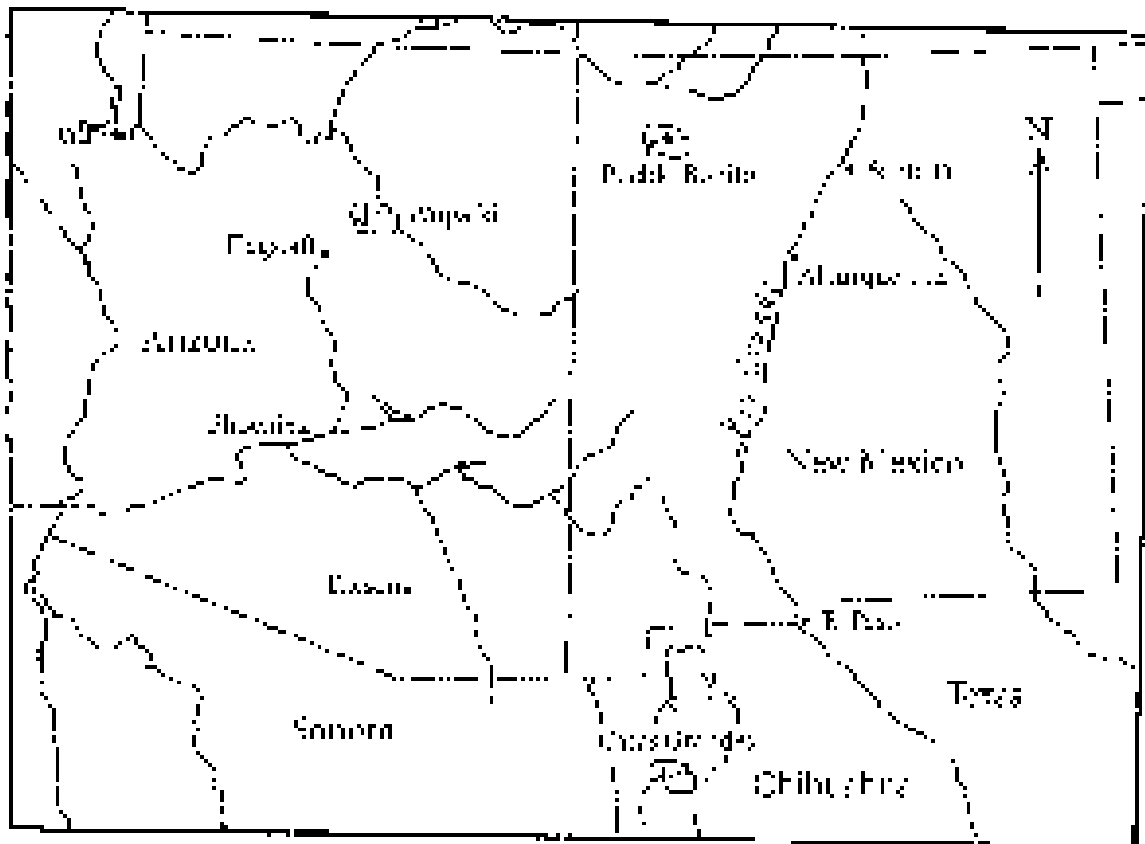


Figure 7.2. Map of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States. After Hargrave 1970: Fig. 16.



Figure 7.3. Mimbres bowl with parrot. Drawing by author after bowl in collection of the Logan Museum of Anthropology, Beloit College.

511). In the Mimbres region, iconographic evidence from pottery indicates that macaws were captured and transported in baskets into the region, where they were raised until they attained the age of ten to thirteen months. It is at this age, when the long tail feathers of macaws are fully formed, that they appear to have been sacrificed and placed in burials with individuals afforded preferential mortuary treatment; these individuals appear to have been associated with special responsibilities in the local community including ceremonies pertaining to agricultural cycles (Creel and McKusick 1994: 521).

Similar archaeological evidence characterizes the Anasazi cultural region of the American Southwest, as at the site of Pueblo Bonito (Pepper 1920: 193–194).⁵ Hargrave (1970: 28) reanalyzed the bones from this site and confirmed their identification as those of the Scarlet Macaw. Likewise at the site of Wupatki, in the Sinagua cultural area, Hargrave (1933: 26) encountered macaw carcasses that had been “wrapped in rush matting for burial, as shown by imprints in the soil, which denotes human care in the burial of the dead.” Based on the age classification of the Scarlet Macaw specimens identified by Hargrave (1970: 53) through-

out the Southwest, he determined that there was no evidence that the birds were bred there, but rather were traded into the region from farther south in Mexico from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries. As he also noted, the macaw remains correlate with primary population centers, and any secondary radiation of macaws to smaller sites appears to have been rare.⁶

At the site of Casas Grandes in northern Mexico (fig. 7.4), particularly between AD 1100 and 1340, the breeding of Scarlet Macaws for their feathers appears to have been a family profession that endured for generations, as evidenced by archaeological remains of eggs, nesting boxes, and carcasses of nestlings and birds of all ages in macaw breeding and raising areas throughout the site (Di Peso 1974: 599–600; Di Peso, Rinaldo, and Fenner 1974: 267–268). In addition to the bird remains from these areas, plucked Scarlet Macaw carcasses were recovered from burials where they were placed beneath plaza floors either in conjunction with other Scarlet or Military

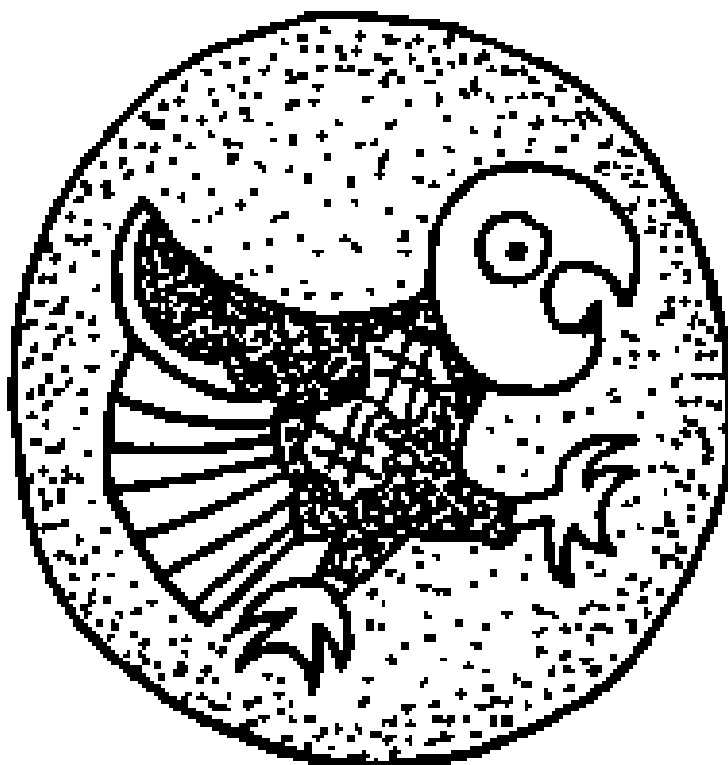


Figure 7.4. Casas Grandes vessel with macaw. Drawing by author after Di Peso, Rinaldo, and Fenner 1974: Fig. 309-8.

macaws or with human occupants, probably as objects of sacrifice or funerary offerings (McKusick 1974: 276). Many of the macaws appear to have been sacrificed at approximately the age of one year, when their first full tail feathers were grown, for an apparently ritual or commercial purpose that was roughly timed to the vernal equinox (McKusick 1974: 176).

While any evidence for trade in macaw feathers in ancient southern Mesoamerica is considerably less well documented, there are still tantalizing bits of evidence to suggest that macaws and their feathers were valued as commodities, used for ornamentation, and employed for ceremonial use in this region.⁷ During the Preclassic period, macaw remains—some with wing bones cut in such a way that the feathers were preserved intact—were recovered from storage pits in household clusters at the site of Tierras Largas in the Valley of Oaxaca.⁸ Flannery (1976: 340, table 11.3) dated the context of the remains to the late Tierras Largas phase (1300–1200 BC), but cautioned that the feature could be intrusive from circa 600 BC. As macaws are not native to the Valley of Oaxaca, but found only in southern areas of the modern state, Flannery surmised that their bones provide evidence of trade with other regions in Mesoamerica. As Flannery and Winter (1976: 39) further noted, the fact that macaw bones were found only at the site of Tierras Largas may indicate that “the accumulation and/or working of these feathers may have been restricted to the Etla region, or possibly even restricted to households at Tierras Largas alone.” Grove and Gillespie (1992: 23) and Valadez Azúa and Arrellín Rosas (2000: 318–321) concurred, stating that the presence of macaw bones at this date points to a well-established system of long-distance exchange in perishable goods already by the Preclassic period.

Bird bones and feathers also occur among the archaeological remains of the lowland Maya despite their enormously fragile nature. In fact, as Pohl (1983: 83) observed for the Maya Lowlands, bird bones occur more often in sacred contexts, such as caches and burials, than in refuse deposits.

As she further elaborated, the presence of macaw bones in an Early Classic cache at Tikal demonstrates the great distances across which these birds and their feathers were traded, as macaws favor remote regions and would undoubtedly have avoided areas of high population density such as Early Classic Tikal.

Likewise, an Early Classic cache from the Highland Guatemala site of Zaculeu contained a macaw skeleton, in addition to a cylindrical tripod with two jade beads inside, and two bowls, one of which held eleven river pebbles (fig. 7.5A) (Woodbury and Trik 1953: 114–115). This cache, from the east side of Structure 9 in sterile soil

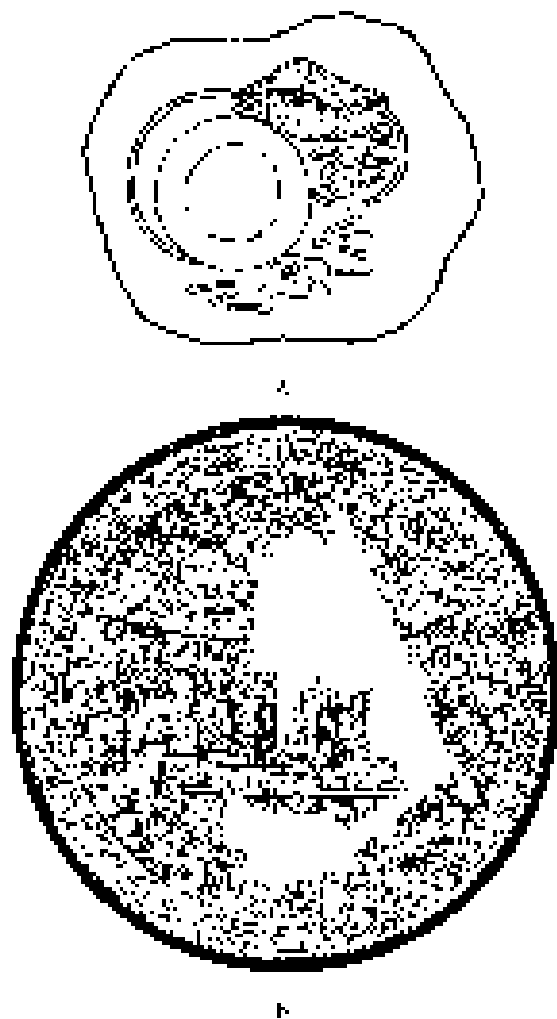


Figure 7.5. Macaw remains and imagery from Zaculeu, Guatemala: A, Cache from Structure 9; B, Early Classic plaque from Structure 1 tomb. After Woodbury and Trik 1953: 114 and Fig. 131.

beneath the terrace, is especially interesting given that it dates to the same Aztec phase, or Early Classic period, as the mosaic-decorated plaque from the tomb in Structure 1 at the same site, which depicts a ruler costumed as the Principal Bird Deity and standing upon a throne, as suggested in Chapter 5 (fig. 7.5B).

Perhaps the most impressive ritual context for macaw bones in the Maya region is at the site of Copán, Honduras. During the Late Classic period, the ruler Yax Pasaj initiated an aggressive new building program that included the remodeling of Structure 10L-16. As part of the dedication of this final version of the temple, Yax Pasaj erected Altar Q, whose imagery traced the ruling dynasty of Copán from the time of its original founder, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' (Fash 1991; Schele and Freidel 1990). In the large dedicatory crypt associated with Altar Q, fourteen large cats, including jaguars, were buried in conjunction with two macaws as well as the tail fans of seven other unidentified birds (Ballinger and Stomper 2000). As Ballinger and Stomper correctly noted, the inclusion of macaws is especially intriguing as, beyond any economic or symbolic associations, they may also reference the founder of the Copán dynasty, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', whose name means "Great-Sun First Quetzal Macaw" (Martin and Grube 2000: 192).

Beyond such admittedly limited archaeological evidence, several ethnographers commented upon the ancient Maya trade in macaw feathers. Blom (1932: 541–542) noted that the presence of macaw and quetzal feathers in imagery from Yucatán indicated ancient trade relationships with southern Mesoamerica (cf. Barrera Vásquez 1939: 14). By contrast, the 1722 report written by Fray Francisco Ximénez in the Highland Guatemala town of Sacapulas recorded the practice of raising domesticated macaws so that the feathers of the birds could be used in dances and to decorate altars.⁹ Hellmuth (1977: 425–426) likewise called attention to a seventeenth-century *relación* of the Cholti-Lacandon town of Sac Balam written by Nicolás de Valenzuela:

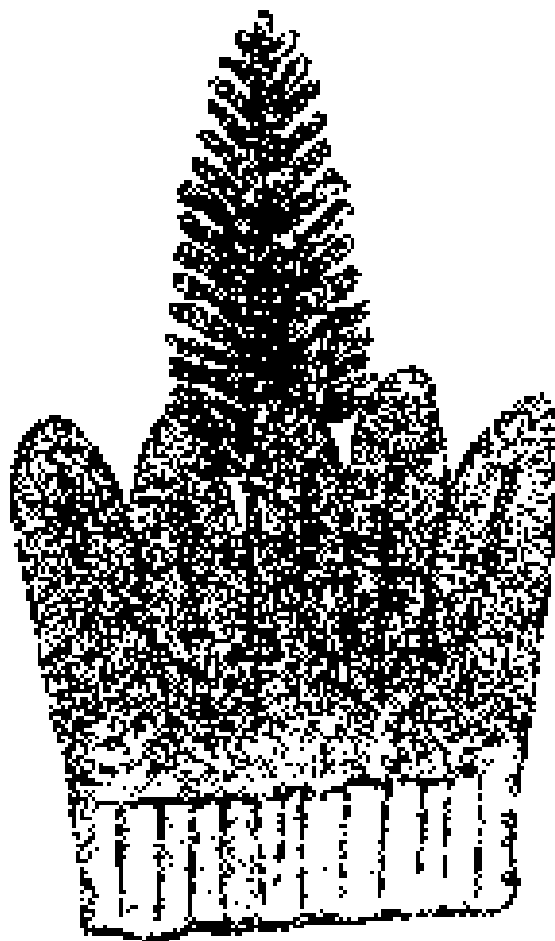


Figure 7.6. Depiction of probable Scarlet Macaw feathers paid as tribute from the province of Soconusco. Detail of folio 13r in the Aztec *Matrícula de Tributos*. Drawing by author.

And there were many tame macaws. At 5 o'clock in the afternoon, after having flown around, they came to roost on the ridge poles of all the houses, forming a delightfully beautiful landscape of various deep red colored clusters of flowers.

With regards to central Mexico, Gasco and Voorhies (1989: 64–65) made the case that the red feathers depicted in the Aztec *Matrícula de Tributos*, which records the tribute of thirty-two Aztec provinces around the time of the Conquest, represent those of the Scarlet Macaw (fig. 7.6). Interestingly, according to the *Matrícula*, the province of Soconusco and that of Tochtepec along the



Figure 7.7. Feather-working shop portrayed in Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, Book 9. Drawing by author.

Gulf Coast were the only two areas taxed in "red feathers," or what was probably the plumage of the Scarlet Macaw (Gasco and Voorhies 1989: 60). Such tribute goods, including Scarlet Macaw feathers, were employed in Aztec communities and workshops devoted to feather working, as attested in the *Florentine Codex* (fig. 7.7) (Sahagún 1959: 94).¹⁰

In part, this reverence for the macaw in both the American Southwest and Mesoamerica must have stemmed from its dramatic appearance (fig. 7.1).¹¹ Scarlet Macaws are very large birds, sometimes forty inches in length, with a brilliantly plumed body of scarlet red, a band of yellow through the shoulder and wing, and a touch of iridescent blue on the wing tips; their tails are formed from long scarlet feathers whose underside is pale blue. They possess large heads with big eyes set in white eye patches, as well as colossal hooked beaks like those of raptors and menacing claws that enable them to move about in the canopies of trees where they feed on fruits and nuts.¹² As they

fly through the air, they often noisily call in a loud, hoarse squawk, "rraaah, rrahk." Although often found in family groups of three to four birds, they are also known to unite in flocks and communal roosts of twenty-five to fifty birds (Stiles and Skutch 1989: 177).¹³

Fascination with macaws may also stem from their uncanny ability to mimic human speech, which is credited to their status as among the world's most intelligent birds (Sick 1993: 255). Pohl (2001: 97) recognized that their ability to "talk" undoubtedly contributed to the oracular associations of macaws in ancient Mesoamerica, and pointed to a report by Fray Francisco de Burgoa (1934) of a seventeenth-century Zapotec man who was accused of paganistic practices because he prayed and made offerings to a macaw kept in his house whose "responses" caused the old man "to tremble in fear" (cf. Di Peso 1974: 273). A Late Preclassic Monte Alban II (150/100 BC–AD 200) ceramic model of a temple attests to the antiquity of this reverence for macaws in the Valley of Oaxaca: a macaw with open beak, as if uttering a cry, emerges from the temple floor, perhaps from a secret entrance, as Marcus and Flannery (1996: 185) observed.¹⁴

As Pohl (2001: 97) continued, the attribution of such status to macaws recalls that afforded to Seven Macaw in the *Popol Vuh*, who arrogantly described himself:

I am great. My place is now higher than that of the human work, the human design. I am their sun and I am their light, and I am also their months.

So be it: my light is great. I am the walkway and I am the foothold of the people, because my eyes are of metal. My teeth just glitter with jewels, and turquoise as well; they stand out blue with stones like the face of the sky.

And this nose of mine shines white into the distance like the moon. Since my nest is metal, it lights up the face of the earth. When I come forth before my nest, I am like the sun and moon for those who are born in the light, begotten in the light. It

must be so, because my face reaches into the distance. (D. Tedlock 1985: 86)

Vivid in their description of his appearance, the passages detailing the reign and subsequent demise of Seven Macaw in the *Popol Vuh* also contain tantalizing economic undertones. For example, the description of Seven Macaw emphasizes the rare commodities—jewels, turquoise, and metal—that provide him with his glorious appearance. During the Postclassic period in which this version of the *Popol Vuh* was recorded, these commodities were exchanged via extensive trade networks that linked Mesoamerica to its neighbors in the south and north. Although turquoise and metal were not available to Late Preclassic or Early Classic Mesoamericans (they do not appear in the archaeological record in Mesoamerica until the Terminal Classic period), images of the bird from these periods depict him with jeweled head-dresses, probably made from jade, the most highly prized of commodities at that time (fig. 7.8).¹⁵

The *Popol Vuh* continues by recounting the desire of the Hero Twins—the protagonists of this section of the story, whose actions helped to usher in the era of the present creation—to put an end to the reign of Seven Macaw. The Hero Twins discussed how to go about it:

We could shoot him while he's at his meal.
We could make him ill, then put an end to his riches, his jade, his metal, his jewels, his gems, the source of his brilliance. Everyone might do as he does, but it should not come to be that fiery splendor is merely a matter of metal. (89)

Outraged by the successful shot of the Twin with his blowgun, Seven Macaw cried out:

What is it but those two tricksters! They've shot me, they've dislocated my jaw. All my teeth are just loose, now they ache. (92)

The *Popol Vuh* then describes how the Twins, working with their grandparents, posed as curers who specialized in toothaches. When hearing of their talents, Seven Macaw exclaimed:

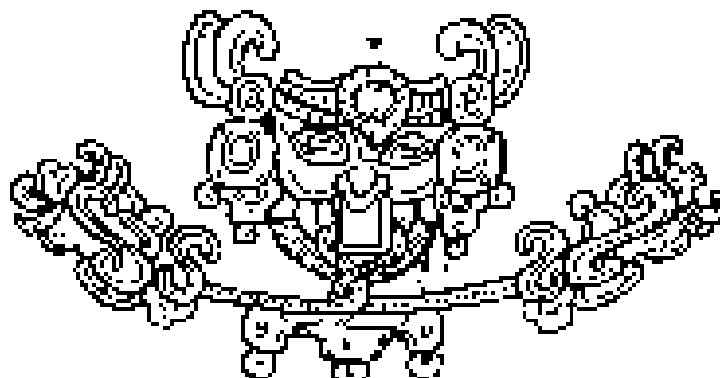
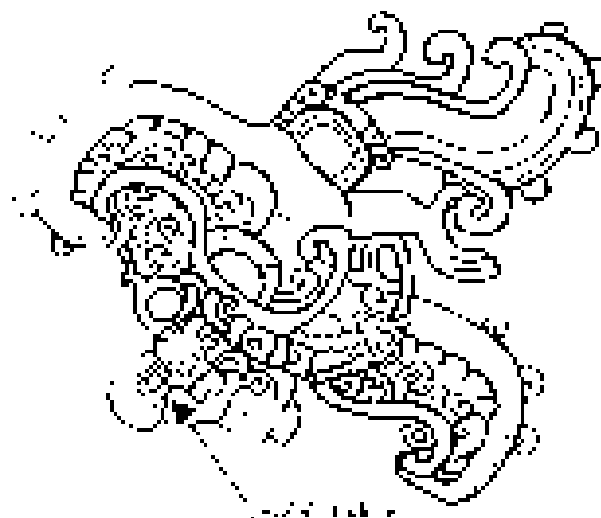


Figure 7.8. Examples of the Principal Bird Deity's jeweled diadem during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods: A, Takalik Abaj Altar 13 detail; B, Detail of Early Classic black basal flange bowl. Drawings by author.

Very well, please cure my teeth. They really ache, every day. It's insufferable! I get no sleep because of them—and my eyes. They just shot me, those two tricksters! Ever since it started I haven't eaten because of it. Therefore take pity on me! Perhaps it's because my teeth are loose now. (93)

Having been told that his teeth must be removed, Seven Macaw replied:

But perhaps it's not good for my teeth to come out—since I am, after all, a lord. My finery is in my teeth—and my eyes. (93)

Cleverly, the imposter-curers offer to replace Seven Macaw's teeth with ground bone, but actually substitute white corn:

And when the teeth of Seven Macaw came out, it was only white corn that went in as a replacement for his teeth—just a coating shining white, that corn in his mouth. His face fell at once, he no longer looked like a lord. The last of his teeth came out, the jewels that had stood out blue from his mouth.

And then the eyes of Seven Macaw were cured. When his eyes were trimmed back the last of his metal came out. Still he felt no pain; he just looked on while the last of his greatness left him. It was just as Hunahpu and Xbalanque had intended. (93–94)

This narrative in the *Popol Vuh* suggests a fascinating, inverse relationship between valuable commodities and maize dough. While bedecked in jewels, metal, and turquoise, Seven Macaw exuded light and magnificence. Stripped of his riches, with the cavities filled with ground maize, the bird's glory—and potency—was ended. In effect, the narrative of the *Popol Vuh* equates Seven Macaw's jewels to his supernatural power. When stripped of these and supplied with ground corn—the stuff of humanity, from which humans are made according to Mesoamerican belief—his supernatural power faded: he became mortal and died.¹⁶

This idea—that Seven Macaw's jewels symbolized his supernatural power—parallels a model suggested by Helms (1993: 7–8) in which a dialogue between society “inside” and the cosmological realm “outside” is reflected in long-distance trade and economic acquisition. In other words, supernatural communication involves access to a distant sphere and the acquisition of some desired or beneficial power or information. Likewise, trade with distant regions enables acquisition of specialized goods. Both acts—supernatural contact and long-distance trade—are predicated on contact with a far-distant sphere, and the acquisition of a valued commodity. In the case of Seven Macaw of the *Popol Vuh*, there seems to be an interesting correlation between his supernatural

power and his possession of jewels, or valued economic commodities.

It is interesting, in light of this suggestion, to consider the potential economic implications of the narrative of Seven Macaw. The bird's defeat represents not so much the bird's death as the usurpation of his power—symbolized by the jewels—by the Hero Twins of the *Popol Vuh* narrative. They, in turn, supply him with maize. This exchange of maize for jewels alludes to the categorical distinctions between this world and the other, humans and gods. It also parallels fundamental economic dynamics that differentiated between locally produced, subsistence goods such as maize, and exotic prestige goods such as jewels or jade that were, nonetheless, conceptually linked through their shared symbolic associations with preciousness, fertility, and life.¹⁷ Accordingly, the shooting of the bird symbolized not so much his “death” as the moment of transition in which this exchange between two spheres occurred. It was only after this event, in which power literally and figuratively exchanged hands, that the creation of the present era could ensue.¹⁸

The shooting of Seven Macaw in the *Popol Vuh* narrative also may have alluded to the role of macaws as a commodity within this network of economic exchange. The “jewels” of Seven Macaw may have been, in fact, his brightly colored feathers. This relationship between “jewels” and “feathers,” albeit quetzal feathers, is reflected in an Aztec song, recorded by Angel María Garibay (1953), which describes a ballgame between the deity Huemac and the Tlaloques, who were the supernatural assistants of the rain god Tlaloc:

Huemac plays ball; with the Tlaloques he played.

The Tlaloques told him:

What do we win playing?

Huemac told them:

My jades, my quetzal feathers.

Later the gods said:

You win the same thing: our fine green stones, our quetzal feathers.

Now they play ball: Huemac won the game.

Now the Tlaloques go to change what they
will give Huemac:

Quetzal for maize; precious feathers for
corn cobs in which the ear of corn is
inside.

He didn't want to receive them, and said:
Is that what I bet? Aren't they perchance
jades?

Aren't they quetzal feathers? That . . . take
it away from here!

The gods say:

Very well, give him jades, give him feathers
and they took and left

taking their own jades and their feathers,
they said:

Let's hide our jades . . . For four years
distress and difficulties the Toltec will
suffer! (translation in Matos
Moctezuma 2001: 95)

Certainly during the Late Preclassic period, the attention paid to avian costumes worn by elite performers—attested in the artistic record—can be interpreted as a measure of their economic status and value (fig. 7.9). Probably created from the brightly colored feathers of the Scarlet Macaw, these costumes worn by Late Preclassic rulers functioned on a variety of symbolic levels. On a conceptual plane, they identified the wearer with the myth of the Principal Bird Deity, the vain and beautiful macaw who was a denizen of the supernatural realm.¹⁹ In economic terms, they may have marked the wearer as a participant within an elite system of exchange that involved the acquisition or control of Scarlet Macaw feathers, readily obtained only in regions of dense wet forests. Within the Izapan style sphere, which extended from Veracruz through the Pacific coastal piedmont and into the Guatemalan Highlands, elites undoubtedly had ready access to these birds, which are still generally distributed throughout these regions (Alvarez del Toro 1971: 81).

Based on these various arguments, it is tempting to suggest that the Late Preclassic sites at which one finds bird transformation imagery may have been participating within an elite interaction

network that involved—at an economic level—the exchange of macaws and their feathers, as well as—on a conceptual level—the exchange of a codified set of ritual behaviors centered around avian transformation. Seen in this light, the imagery takes on economic ramifications that imply a direct relationship between the exchange of ideas and goods.²⁰ Did these avian rituals and their trappings correspond to sites participating in the trade and distribution of macaws and/or their feathers? Was the exchange of macaw feathers predicated on these rituals or vice versa? Did the distribution of macaws and their feathers follow, or move in conjunction with, other established Late Preclassic trade routes, such as that of cacao? Or obsidian? Or jade? Or spondylus? Or even particular ceramic wares, for that matter? While in truth such notions are purely speculative, they offer a feasible explanation—premised on both an economic and an ideological platform—for the imagery of bird dancers that functioned as a currency of political exchange during the Late Preclassic period throughout broad geographic and ethnic regions. The “trappings of ritual” were just that and more: the bird costumes and attendant rituals overtly signaled participation in a system of elite economic and political exchange that defined a significant interaction sphere in Late Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerica. Phrased in a slightly different way, the value of the bird feathers operated at several different levels: they had an elite economic or use value based on their rarity (or difficulty to obtain, even when locally available), they were loaded with cosmological significance through their association with the myth of the Principal Bird Deity, and they had political value as a sign of participation within a broader system of ritual and ideological exchange. Perhaps those sites—such as Izapa, La Mojarra,

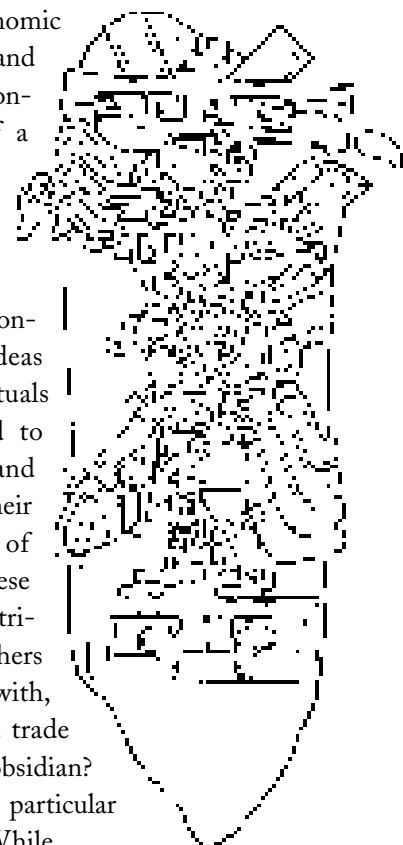


Figure 7.9. Izapa Stela 4.
Drawing by Ajax Moreno.
Courtesy of the New
World Archaeological Foundation.

Takalik Abaj, and Kaminaljuyu—that erected monuments of avian transformation were important destinations along Late Preclassic trade routes through which goods such as macaw feathers, jade, cacao, and other precious commodities were exchanged in conjunction with a prescribed set of ritual behaviors that invoked the myth of the Principal Bird Deity. The rituals, which by their very nature necessitated contact with the supernatural realm, were metaphorically analogous to long-distance trade. As such, the avian performances were certainly more than esoteric incantations and arcane dances: they carried political and economic significance that served to buttress a ruler's claim to status and power. Moreover, by donning the costume of a macaw, Late Preclassic rulers invoked a symbol of transcendence between boundaries, human and supernatural, near and far, economic and conceptual. Importantly, this suggestion dovetails with an observation by Houston (2000: 175) that the word *mut*, which means not only “bird” but also “fame” or “news” in Yucatec Maya, might have expressed “an overlap between the notion of winged news, [or] the motion of birds as metaphors for long-distance speech” (cf. Carrasco n.d.; Hull n.d.).

Ritual behavior and trade are inseparable components within the greater matrix of communication and exchange. For ancient Mesoamericans and their counterparts in the American Southwest, the macaw functioned as a symbol that not only stood at the intersection of myth, ritual, and economics but also endured with some consistency for a great length of time (cf. Pohl 2001). For Late Preclassic Mixe-Zoquean- and Mayan-speaking peoples, the macaw symbolized supernatural contact through its mythic persona as the Principal Bird Deity and may also have served as a symbol of elite, economic exchange. Even in the *Popol Vuh*, transcribed over a thousand years later, the macaw appears to have carried associations on both a mythic and an economic level. These associations are also echoed in the seventeenth-century account by Burgoa, in which a macaw functioned as a medium through which supernatural communication could be channeled. Even the

Postclassic Aztecs believed a macaw to be the personification of Seven Flower-Xochipilli, a deity associated with the sun, maize, royalty, crafts making, cacao, and hallucinogenic plants (Pohl 2001: 97). The macaw's mythic significance for the Aztecs was also paralleled in its value as a commodity and source of brilliant feathers. Moreover, these powerful associations of the bird were not confined to Mesoamerica, but functioned as part of the currency of exchange that linked Mesoamerica to the American Southwest by at least the eleventh century, as evidenced in the Pima myth that credits a parrot (or most probably a macaw) as the medium through which turquoise was obtained.

Such striking continuities in the symbolic associations of macaws also characterize the K'iche' *Rab'in al Achi* dance drama. In the drama the Warrior of K'iche', about to be killed by means of an arrow sacrifice, identifies himself with the bird that is shot out of the World Tree, and phrases his sacrifice as an act of “feathergrowing” (Akkeren 1999: 293). As Akkeren noted, this association is found also in the *Chi Ismach*, in which the victim of sacrifice is referred to as a “red-feathered macaw” or “mother of birds.” The warrior/victim as bird, then, becomes the “game,” while the those who sacrifice are the “hunters.” In this sense, as Akkeren demonstrated, the killing of the macaw/victim is a metaphor for acquisition, or hunting, which was invoked by rulers in Late Postclassic *Rab'in al* during rituals of political transition or the commemoration of important historical events and ancestral ties.

Although the conceptual and economic roles of macaws within Precolumbian Mesoamerica cannot be denied, one has only to turn to the *Titulos de la casa Ixquin-Nehaib* (Recinos 1957) in order to conclude that the metaphor of avian transformation superseded any concern with a natural, scientific representation of a specific species. Supernatural communication was readily conveyed through the symbolic motif of avian transformation, macaw or otherwise. This K'iche' account of the conquest of Guatemala records the events from an indigenous perspective that dramatically diverges

from the account by the Spanish general Alvarado (Bricker 1981).²¹ According to Alvarado, the Spanish watched the K'iche' warriors advance and then quickly defeated them, killing "one of the four chiefs of the city of Utatlan . . . who was the captain general of all this country" (Mackie 1924: 58). As Bricker (1981: 41) noted, this chief was undoubtedly Tecum Umam, who figures prominently into the K'iche' account of the same battle:

Immediately the king of Chi Gumarcaah [Santa Cruz Quiche] sent [a message] to a great captain called Tecún-Tecum [Tecum Umam], grandson of Quicab, [the] chief. . . And this captain brought many people of many towns, who were ten thousand Indians in all, all came armed with their bows and arrows, slings, lances, and other arms. And Captain Tecum, before leaving his town and in front of the chiefs, demonstrated his fortitude and his courage and immediately put on wings with which he flew and his two arms and legs were covered with feathers and he wore a crown, and on his chest he wore a very large emerald [jade?] which looked like a mirror, and he wore another on his forehead. And another on his back. He looked very gallant. This captain flew like an eagle, he was a great nobleman and a great sorcerer. (Bricker 1981: 39–40)²²

The account then describes the setbacks suffered by the Maya. Faced with the insurmountable adversity of the Spaniards,

. . . Captain Tecum flew up, he came like an eagle full of real feathers, which were not artificial; he wore wings which also sprang from his body and he wore three crowns, one was of gold, another of pearls and another of diamonds and emeralds. That Captain Tecum came with the intention of killing Tuadiú who came on horseback and he hit the horse instead of the Adelantado and he beheaded the horse with one lance. It was not a lance of iron but of shiny stone

and this captain had placed a spell on it. And when he saw that it was not the Adelantado but the horse who had died, he returned to fly overhead, in order to come from there to kill the Adelantado. Then the Adelantado awaited him with his lance and he impaled this Captain Tecum with it. Immediately two dogs ran up, they did not have a single hair, they were hairless, those dogs seized this Indian in order to tear him into pieces, and as the Adelantado saw that this Indian was very gallant and that he wore these three crowns of gold, silver, diamonds and emeralds and of pearls, he came to defend him from the dogs, and he stood looking at him very deliberately. He appeared covered with quetzal [feathers] and very beautiful plumes, for which reason this town of Quetzaltenango [Quezaltenango] was given its name, because here is where the death of this Captain Tecum came to pass. And immediately the Adelantado called to all his soldiers to come and see the beauty of the quetzal Indian. Then the Adelantado told his soldiers that he had never seen another Indian as gallant and as noble and covered with such beautiful quetzal feathers, in Mexico, nor in Tlaxcala, nor in any of the towns that he had conquered, and therefore the Adelantado said that the name of this town would henceforth be Quetzaltenango. Immediately Quetzaltenango became the name of this town. (Bricker 1981: 40 after Recinos 1957)

The differences between the two accounts are dramatic and telling. In effect, the defeat of Tecum Umam, who, as Bricker (1981: 40) noted, is the culture hero of the Maya people of Highland Guatemala, was expressed as an avian transformation.²³ While Captain Tecum's flight is described as that of an eagle, his costume is identified as that of a quetzal, known for its iridescent green plumage. Even more importantly, this avian transformation is presented not as an escape or even as

a defeat, but rather as an act of fortitude and courage. It also marked and embodied the act of transition that ushered in the period of colonial domination by the Spanish, much as the “defeat” of Seven Macaw of the *Popol Vuh* marked the transition between creations, and much as the avian journeys by Late Preclassic rulers marked their abilities to cross the threshold between realms and regions. It is also interesting that the description of Captain Tecum’s transformation includes references to his costume of feathers, an emerald (or more likely jade or turquoise), and mirrors: all costume elements worn by the Principal Bird Deity during the Late Preclassic period as well as by Seven Macaw in the *Popol Vuh*, and all elements that carried deep historical significance as symbols of both political status and economic wealth.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps it was during the Preclassic period that a specific pattern of rituals involving avian transformation were first forged and applied to a network of mythological beliefs, ideologies, and economic interactions that functioned as part of an elite system of exchange throughout the Izapan style sphere. Although the rituals have long since subsided, the stone monuments that record them and the sacred centers in which they were performed still attest to their importance during this dynamic period in Mesoamerican history. The monuments, through a strikingly consistent symbolic vocabulary and shared stylistic sensibility, continue to declare that avian transformations were an effective means through which Late Preclassic rulers could demonstrate their control of economic, political, and supernatural spheres.

As Tambiah (1985: 128) argued, ritual must be approached as a

culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. [Ritual] is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality

(conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition).

Izapan style monuments of avian performance, with their recurring patterns of representation, clearly depict ritual moments and were part of a “constructed system of symbolic communication.” The ramifications of such a statement, however, are great. By so viewing the monuments, one can move beyond purely iconographic or formal analysis and begin to consider the monuments as actors on the stage of history. The monuments, as well as their imagery, become invested with even greater meaning as part of a larger, Late Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerican elite conversation that reverberated across linguistic boundaries. Their very presence structured a political discourse in tandem with live performances—undoubtedly replete with “ordered sequences of words and acts,” sacred architecture, costumes, ritual implements, and assembled audiences.

Conceptually inseparable, ritual and the stela form became powerful vehicles for “the dramatization of mythic traditions and the propagation of political ideology.”²⁴ Although only one subset of a rich corpus of stela monuments, the images of avian performances attest to a Late Preclassic sharing of ritual, iconographic, and formal devices that not only permeated political boundaries, but was *deliberate*: the imagery would have been intelligible to a broad audience, regardless of ethnic affiliation.²⁵ In fact, this imagery speaks to the complex variety of interactions that characterized Late Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerica and the need to forge a vocabulary that bridged diversity. The avian transformation monuments thus elucidate one mechanism through which political, cosmological, and economic messages were communicated. Yet, as a group, they also communicate a range of stylistic variation that speaks to a certain amount of receptivity to individuality of expression and the rich fabric of ritual behavior (cf. Tambiah 1985: 125). Perhaps even more importantly, they attest to the role that monumental art played in Mesoamerica, a role that often receives second-

ary consideration in a field dominated by exciting archaeological discoveries and epigraphic breakthroughs. Especially with regards to the Preclassic period, the monuments and their messages are a primary tool for discerning meaning. They are also

a powerful mechanism through which one can catch a glimmer of a moment in Mesoamerican history in which notions of politics, myth, history, economics, ritual, and performance were crystallized in sculptural form.

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NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

1. A stela is a vertically oriented stone slab, carved or uncarved, that is set upright within a site. As Clancy (1999: 135 n. 7) stipulated, “The term ‘stela’ is the Greek word for a similar form, but the public function performed by the Greek stela is not precisely that of the Maya stela. Both commemorated individuals and events, but the funerary associations of the Greek stela do not belong to the Maya monument.” These same qualifications apply to Late Preclassic Izapan style stelae.

2. The Olmec flourished during the Early (1500–900 BC) and Middle Preclassic (900–300 BC) periods. The Classic Maya period is generally defined as AD 250–900.

3. Throughout this study, works of art from the site of Izapa are referred to as “Izapa” monuments or “Izapa” sculpture. The more encompassing designations “Izapan style” or “Izapan” include monuments or sculpture not only from the site of Izapa, but from a number of sites scattered throughout the broader “Izapan style” region. The historical development and problematic nature of these two designations is discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

4. The terms Late Preclassic and Late Formative are used interchangeably throughout this volume.

5. See, for instance, Clark and Hansen (2001), Fowler (1991), Guernsey and Love (2005), Guernsey Kappelman (1997, 2002, 2003), Hammond (1982), Hirth (1984), Joyce and Grove (1999b), and Valdés (1995).

6. For a sampling of this data from various sites, see Adams (2000), Coe (1990), Freidel (1986a), Hammond (1991), McAnany and López Varela (1999), Pendergast (1982), and Valdés (1995).

7. While developments such as these are found throughout much of Mesoamerica during the Preclassic period, it is important to note that they were not aspects of a monolithic, evenly distributed, or unified system of sites and networks of exchange.

8. See Freidel (1978, 1986a), Friedel, Reese-Taylor, and Mora-Marín (2002), Garber (1983, 1986, 1989), Reese-Taylor (n.d.), and Reese-Taylor and Walker (2002).

9. See, for example, Freidel (1985, 1986b), Freidel and Schele (1988a, 1988b), Hammond (1999), Hansen (1990), McAnany (1995), Reese-Taylor and Walker (2002), Ringle (1999), and Scarborough (1991).

10. See Ringle (1999: 187) for an excellent discussion of the shortcomings of purely materialist approaches to an analysis of monumental sculpture and architecture.

11. Based on the significantly different material cultural assemblages between the Guatemalan Highlands and the Guatemalan Pacific Coast during the Late Preclassic, Medrano and Bove (1994) postulated that this region of southeastern Mesoamerica was multiethnic.

12. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the difficulties in ascertaining the specific linguistic affiliation of the population at Izapa during the Late Preclassic period.

13. According to John Justeson (personal communication 1997), a hieroglyphic inscription on Late Preclassic Takalik Abaj Stela 5 bears the title *ajaw* spelled in Mayan with the phonetic complement *-wa*. However, Kathryn Josserand (personal communication 2003) questions the assumption of a Mayan presence at Takalik Abaj during the Late Preclassic period based on an unclear Mayan etymology for the title *ajaw* and the obvious interethnic sharing of symbols of authority during this time period. For the archaeological history of Takalik Abaj, as well as its sculptural inventory, see Graham (1979, 1981, 1989), Graham, Heizer, and Shook (1978), Orrego Corzo (1990), Orrego Corzo and Schieber de Lavarreda (2001), Popenoe de Hatch et al. (2000), and Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2001, 2002).

14. See below, and note 34, for a more in-depth discussion of the linguistic affiliation of Kaminaljuyu during the Late Preclassic period.

15. See Braswell (2002) and Braswell and Amador Berdugo (1999) for a more recent consideration of fluctuating patterns of obsidian acquisition and distribution in the Guatemalan Highlands during the Preclassic period and its relationship to various ceramic assemblages and networks of exchange.

16. See Clark, Lee, and Salcedo (1989) for a detailed

documentation of the fluctuating patterns in the control and distribution of obsidian in ancient Soconusco from the Late Archaic through the Colonial periods. Although in this article the authors did not attempt to relate these fluctuations to political events in Mesoamerica due to ongoing analysis of the evidence, they cited Zeitlin's (1982) work on obsidian distribution, which argued that changing patterns of obsidian use often parallel major political events. Also see Andrews (1990: 13) for an interpretation of Preclassic period evidence for obsidian distribution networks, as well as Clark (1987), Clark and Lee (1984), Clark, Lee, and Salcedo (1989), and Clark and Pye (n.d.).

17. See Shook and Kidder (1952) for a detailed analysis of the Late Preclassic tombs found in Kaminaljuyu Mound E-III-3. As Popenoe de Hatch (2002: 282) described: "These tombs contained the greatest number of offerings found so far in the Guatemalan highlands during Preclassic times. Tomb I contained 345 vessel offerings, while the subsequent Tomb II had more than 200."

18. For discussions of Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu's sociopolitical development and complexity, see, among others, Kaplan (1995), Kidder (1948), Kidder, Jennings, and Shook (1946), Michels (1979), Schortman and Urban (1991), Sharer and Sedat (1987), Shook (1971), Shook and Kidder (1952), and Valdés and Wright (2004).

19. As Fowler (1991: 1) observed, "the term 'periphery' implies a marginal status for the region vis-à-vis nuclear Mesoamerica," which, in fact, "was certainly not peripheral in any sense of the word." Numerous scholars have addressed the role of this region in the development of Late Preclassic and Classic Maya culture, and in particular its influence on certain ceramic features throughout the Guatemalan Highlands and Maya Lowlands. See, for instance, Beaudry and Whitley (1989), Bishop, Demarest, and Sharer (1989), Bove (1989), Bove and Heller (1989), Demarest and Sharer (1982, 1986), Estrada Belli (2002), Kosakowsky (2002), Kosakowsky, Estrada Belli, and Neff (1999), Popenoe de Hatch (1989c), Popenoe de Hatch and Shook (1999), Schortman and Urban (1991), Sharer (1974, 1978, 1989), Sharer and Gifford (1970), Sheets (1983), Shook (1965), and Urban and Schortman (1986).

20. Also see Anderson (1978: 155) and Sharer (1974, 1978 3:209–210).

21. For example, see Clark, Hansen, and Pérez (2000), Coe (1965), Cyphers Guillén (1982), Demarest (1976: 101), de la Fuente (1973: 26), Lowe (1977), Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 135), Porter (1989), Proskouriakoff (1968: 123), and Smith (1984: 44).

22. Guernsey (n.d.) addressed these traits and their significance as part of a shared ritual complex during the Late Preclassic period.

23. Only two miniature, fifteen-centimeter-tall, "potbelly" sculptures were found in surface collections at El Ujuxte (Love 1999a: 142). See note 26.

24. Love (2002b: 69) summarized the situation and

suggested that more attention be paid to the multifaceted nature of interactions along the Pacific coastal plain during the Late Preclassic period, which was probably "far more complex than a monolithic interaction between Maya and Mixe-Zoquean ethnic groups," as evidenced, for instance, by the "lack of broad ties between Izapa and El Ujuxte both of which [were] supposedly Mixe-Zoquean" at this time. Also see Guernsey and Love (2005).

25. See, for example, Beaudry-Corbett (2002), Bove (1989), Bove and Heller (1989), and Estrada Belli (1998, 2002).

26. See Demarest (1986), Parsons (1986: 39–45), Popenoe de Hatch (1989b), and Shook (1971) for discussions of the widespread Late Preclassic potbelly sculpture phenomenon. As Guernsey Kappelman (2003) noted, questions concerning the origins of the potbelly form, its relationship to other sculptural modes, its function within site centers, and the motivations for its use elude simple answers and continue to be of central importance to fully defining the role of public sculpture in southeastern Mesoamerica during the Late Preclassic period. The significance of plain stelae during this same period will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

27. This idea of a vibrant, Late Preclassic "latticework" of interaction networks has been postulated in many different forms. For example, see Bernal (1969), Coe (1962), Demarest (1976, 1989, 2002), Fahsen (1995), Freidel (1979), Freidel, Reese-Taylor, and Mora-Marín (2002), Kosakowsky (2002), Parsons (1986), Proskouriakoff (1968), Rathje (1971, 1972), and Valdés (1993, 1995).

28. Also see Pohl, Pope, and von Nagy (2002) for the controversial suggestion of early writing on a cylinder seal from the site of San Andrés, five kilometers northeast of La Venta, Tabasco.

29. Although the focus of this book is on southeastern Mesoamerica, it is important to note that another script tradition evolved in the Zapotec region of modern Oaxaca by, at least, the Late Preclassic period (c. 500–200 BC) (Marcus 1976).

30. Coe and Kerr (1997: 67) and Graham, Heizer, and Shook (1978: 92) placed the date in the year AD 126; however, Justeson (personal communication 1997) places the date in AD 125.

31. Graham, Heizer, and Shook (1978: 90–91) provided a convincing argument for the Cycle 7, or 7th Bak-tun, date of this monument, noting previous analyses of the calendrical notation by Lehmann (1926), Thompson (1943), Proskouriakoff (1950), and Coe (1957a).

32. See note 13.

33. See Lehmann (1936–1939: 186) and Thompson (1948: 31).

34. Kathryn Josserand and Nicholas Hopkins (personal communication 2002) noted that Ch'olan, *per se*, did not exist at this Late Preclassic time depth. John Justeson and Terry Kaufman (personal communication 2003), as well as

Kathryn Josserand (personal communication 2003) suggested that a more accurate designation for the language that may have been spoken at Kaminaljuyu during the Late Preclassic would be “Greater Tzeltalan language” (or Ch’olan-Tzeltalan), the common ancestor of both Ch’olan and Tzeltalan languages. Josserand (personal communication 2003) further observed that several Mayan languages might have been spreading out over relatively large geographic areas, including the Guatemalan Highlands, during this period. She suggested, as a viable alternative to the Ch’olan-Tzeltalan hypothesis, that people inhabiting the Valley of Guatemala at this time may have spoken an ancestral form of Pokom (from the Greater K’ichean branch of Mayan).

35. This identification was made by Dorie Reents-Budet and Peter Mathews in Demarest et al. (1984: 90–91); also see Fields (1989: 51). According to Richard Hansen (personal communication 2003), the sherd was found in the lower level of an extremely rich Late Preclassic midden in the Tigre Plaza on the east side of the pyramid for which he suggested a date of circa 200–100 BC. See Demarest et al. (1984: 36–37, 90–91) for the original excavation report and Hansen (1990: 85). As Demarest et al. (1984: 91) further noted, other scholars, such as Clemency Coggins, argued that the *ajaw* form on the El Mirador sherd did not represent writing per se but functioned instead as an iconographic symbol. Such arguments reveal the difficulty in differentiating between early writing and iconic forms.

36. See Freidel, Reese-Taylor, and Mora-Marín (2002) for an innovative discussion of the relationship between these glyphlike forms on the facade of Cerros 5C-2nd and early expressions of rulership.

37. El Mirador Stela 2 was originally discovered by Ian Graham in 1962 (see Graham 1967) and published by Parsons (1986: fig. 186). However, the drawing included by Parsons, which was based on a field sketch by Graham, did not include a detailed rendering of any inscribed glyphs within the rectangular panel at the top right corner of the monument. A revised drawing of the monument, published by Hansen (1990: fig. 4c), reveals a fragmentary text composed of several lightly incised, although severely deteriorated, glyphs. As Hansen (1990: 21) stated, Stela 2 was located within the immediate vicinity of two small mounds dated to the Late Preclassic by Nielson (1980), and its stylistic and iconographic relationship to other monuments from this same period argues strongly for a Late Preclassic date for the monument. According to Hansen (personal communication 2003), other examples of monuments with Late Preclassic writing have been found at the sites of Pedernal and El Chiquero, also in the Mirador Basin.

38. Takalik Abaj Monument 11 was found in a secondary Classic period context; see Graham and Porter (1989: 47). Also see Mora-Marín (2001: 309) for a discussion of an unprovenienced celt in the collection of Dumbarton

Oaks whose imagery and text correspond closely to that of Takalik Abaj Stela 5, and whose dedicatory date appears to correspond to the year AD 120 (cf. Schele and Miller 1986: 82–83).

39. In light of this observation, it is important to note that the Classic Maya traced the historical and mythic roots of divine kingship to the Preclassic period. As noted by Grube and Martin (2001: II-4), a hieroglyphic panel from the Temple of the Inscriptions at Tikal traces the history of rulers at that site back to the twelfth century BC. In a similar vein, Mora-Marín (2001: 323) discussed how the presence of Late Preclassic archaisms in Classic period Maya Lowland texts demonstrates an interest in the presentation of ancestral knowledge: “These archaisms, and their glyphic and iconographic contexts, suggest an actively preserved and formalized knowledge (i.e., an historical tradition) of the original forms and meanings of signs, and the cosmological concepts behind them.”

40. Justeson and Kaufman (1993) identified the language of the inscription on La Mojarra Stela 1 as preproto-Zoquean, which is ancestral to modern languages spoken in the modern Mexican states of Veracruz, Tabasco, Chiapas, and Oaxaca. More recently, Houston and Coe (2003) presented a Teotihuacán-style mask that contains another inscription in the Isthmian script. The style of the mask, as Houston and Coe (2003: 157) noted, which compares to others dating to as late as AD 500–600, may indicate that the Isthmian script tradition flourished until later than originally proposed by Justeson and Kaufman.

41. Exceptions to this almost complete lack of writing at Izapa include a series of dots that may represent numerical notation in the upper panel of Stela 1; a bar and effaced cartouche on Stela 9; two bars and an effaced cartouche that may be numerical or calendrical on Stela 27; and a bar and dot numeral seven paired with a calendrical cartouche on Miscellaneous Monument 60. What may represent an effaced cartouche and numerical coefficient also appears in the upper right-hand corner of Altar 60.

42. For an excellent discussion of the problems involved in addressing writing systems, verbal and nonverbal communication, and the recording of information in general, see Boone (1994). Boone considers the respective differences and advantages between glottographic writing systems, which represent speech, and semasiographic ones, in which meaning (versus words or sounds) is suggested by signs. Although Izapan style monuments with their recurring repertoire of motifs could probably be considered, in a very broad sense, as a form of semasiographic communication, that is not the goal of this study, but instead remains a potentially fruitful departure point for future analysis.

43. The term “narrative” demands clarification. Newton (1990: 272) suggested that “narrative art can be either synchronic, when the image evokes in one way or another the entire narrative, or diachronic, when the manner in which we experience the continuum of events in real life is trans-

lated in a set of visual images.” I would suggest that the Izapan style images of bird-costumed performers, which are the focus of this study, function both synchronically and diachronically. As will be expanded upon in later chapters, the imagery most definitely evokes a specific narrative, well documented in both Maya and Mixe-Zoque mythology. At the same time, however, the images also reference actual performances by rulers that, while reduced to a single static image, invoke a continuum of ritual activity.

44. Architectural sculpture is also known from the Mixe-Zoque region of Chiapas during the Preclassic period. For example, two rectangular carved stone monuments were placed on either side of the stairway of Mound 4 at the Middle Preclassic site of Tzutzuculi along the Pacific Coast of Chiapas near Tonalá (McDonald 1983: 16–17). Also, during the Terminal Preclassic Istmo phase at Chiapa de Corzo, Structure 1-IId was equipped with a sloping apron molding that bore an inset panel with a high-relief modeled stucco design (Lowe and Agrinier 1960: fig. 22).

45. Also see the *National Geographic* features on the murals from San Bartolo (Kaufmann 2003; O’Neill 2002).

CHAPTER TWO

1. In her encompassing study of the history of Soconusco, Voorhies (1989: 2, after de la Peña in Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982) defined the region as comprising “a section of the Pacific Coast of southern Mexico that extends from near the present town of Pijijiapan, Chiapas, to a few kilometers east of the Mexican-Guatemalan border. The length of the region is approximately 240 km (144 miles), whereas the median width is 35 km (21 miles). . . . The sea forms the southwestern limit of the region, whereas the inland boundary is marked by the steep escarpment of the coastal range, the Sierra Madre de Chiapas.” Voorhies (1989: 99) further noted that Sahagún referred to the Soconusco region by the Nahuatl name *Anauac* Ayotlan, *anauac* signifying “coastal lowlands” and *ayotlan* designating the region near the town of Ayotla (Ayutla). Because Sahagún and other early historians did not regularly use the name Soconusco to refer to the Pacific lowlands, Voorhies suggested that “the provincial name ‘Soconusco’ may have been given to the region only after the Aztec conquest, when the need for such a name first may have arisen.”

2. Ponce (1948: 8), translation in Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 47).

3. See Ponce de León (1882), translated in Coe (1961: 139–140): “More than sixty rivers descend from the mountains to the sea, which form a very large estuary or lagoon between the sea and the land, by which those of this province are accustomed to treat, in their canoes, with those of Teguantepeque, although for many years this could not be done, nor even navigated, on account of the

many alligators which are in the said estuary, which ate the Indians who went in their canoes.” Perhaps an even greater threat to transport was the tendency of many of the inland waterways to become quickly overgrown and silted and their dramatic and dangerous swelling during the rainy season (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 45; Navarrete 1978: 80).

4. See Clark and Pye (2000), Coggins (1975), Demarest (1989), González Lauck (2000: 393), Graham (1989), Grove and Gillespie (1992: 34), Navarrete (1974), Parsons (1986), Popenoe de Hatch and Shook (1999: 179), and Popenoe de Hatch et al. (2000).

5. According to Mackie (1924: 35), the letters sent by Pedro de Alvarado to Hernán Cortés “were first published as an appendix to the first edition of the Fourth Letter of Cortés which was printed in Toledo [Spain], October 20, 1525.”

6. According to Navarrete (1978: 79), this 1595 account, *Relación de la visita a diversos pueblos y conventos de la Provincia de Chiapas hecha por el Fraile Visitador Tomás Torres, por mandato del Obispo de la dicha provincia*, resides in the Hemeroteca Fernando Castañón, Instituto de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas, Mexico. Also see Feldman (1973a: 132–135) for an account of foot travel through Soconusco included in the *Relación de los Pueblos que comprehende El Obispado de Chiapa*, from 1774, which was located by Feldman in the Biblioteca de Palacio, Madrid, Spain.

7. Ponce (1948: 9), translation in Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 47).

8. Translation of Pineda (1952: 57) from Navarrete (1978: 85). Also see McBryde (1945: 143).

9. Also see Diego García de Palacio’s (1985: 10) very brief description of the languages spoken in the provinces of Soconusco and Chiapas that he made while serving as auditor of the Audiencia of Guatemala and placed in a letter to the king of Spain (cf. Campbell [1988: 308] and Voorhies [1989: 9]).

10. See Campbell (1988: 305–310) and Voorhies (1989: 10) for possible enclaves of other, non-Mixe-Zoquean languages that may have existed in the Soconusco region during pre-Hispanic and Colonial times.

11. The term “Olmec” is problematic. As Pye and Clark (2000: 12) described, the term can be used to describe a specific art style or, by contrast, a particular group of people that inhabited the Gulf Coast lowlands during the Preclassic period. To avoid confusion, they suggested that the term “Olmec” be used to “describe peoples who followed a particular suite of cultural practices that included certain forms of visual representations” but whom are known only through the archaeological record. Used in the manner they suggest, the term reflects a “patterned way of life, or cultural practices, that the participants followed, regardless of their biological, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds” (Clark and Pye 2000: 218). It is this broad definition of the

term “Olmec” used by Clark and Pye that will be employed in this study as well.

12. See Coe (1965), Diehl and Coe (1995), Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993), Grove and Gillespie (1992), and Reilly (1995).

13. Kirchhoff (1943) was the first to define Mesoamerica in terms of diagnostic cultural traits. See Wichmann (1995: 225) for a critique of Campbell and Kaufman's methods in formulating the glottochronological time depth of Mixe-Zoquean languages.

14. Also see Cyrus Thomas's (1911) *Indian Languages of Mexico and Central America and Their Geographical Distribution*, p. 60. Interestingly, Thompson (1943: 108) included the site of Takalik Abaj within this probable Tapachulteca or Mixe-Zoquean language region. However, as already noted in Chapter 1, more recent epigraphic evidence suggests that the site of Takalik Abaj was ethnically Maya by the Late Preclassic period. Also see Thomas (1974) for an in-depth analysis of the geographic position of the Zoquean language in southern Mexico and particularly Chiapas, as well as Feldman (1973b) for Colonial-period languages spoken in Chiapas.

15. See Chapter 1, n. 41 for a list of Izapa monuments that contain hieroglyphs.

16. This Preclassic-period Mixe-Zoquean language block was eventually splintered in later years by immigrants speaking Mayan, Zapotec, and central Mexican languages. This gradual process of fragmentation was speeded by the introduction of Nahuatl as the official language of the region after the province of Soconusco was absorbed into the Aztec Empire at the end of the fifteenth century, and then again by the arrival of the Spanish under Pedro de Alvarado in 1523 (Coe 1961: 23; Foster 1969: 453–456; Lowe 1977: 201; Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 14).

17. The Ocós cultural horizon was first identified by Coe (1961) at the site of La Victoria on the Guatemalan Pacific Coast not far from the border with Mexico. See Ekholm (1969) for a detailed ceramic chronology of Early Preclassic Izapa based on her excavations in Mound 30a at the site, as well as Coe and Flannery (1967), Love (2002b), and Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (1979) for a survey of early cultures in the Ocós area of coastal Guatemala. In addition, it is important to note that the earliest villages along the Pacific Coast were established during the preceding Barra phase (1700–1500 BC) of the Late Archaic period. In fact, the Soconusco region is one of few places in Mesoamerica with attested Late Archaic and Early Preclassic occupations (Clark 1994; Clark and Pye 2000: 230; Lowe 1975; Voorhies 1976).

18. See Arroyo, Neff, and Feathers (2002), Clark (1991: 16), Clark and Pye (2000: 230–234; n.d.), Coe (1961), Coe and Flannery (1967), Lowe (1975), Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 8), Pye and Demarest (1991), Rosenswig (2002), Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (1979), and Voorhies (1976).

19. See Blake (1991), Ceja Tenorio (1985), Clark (1991), Clark and Blake (1994), Clark and Pye (2000: 231–232), Hill, Blake, and Clark (1998), and Lowe (1977: 211).

20. Clark (2004: 46) offered a slightly earlier date for this transformation: “For the Mazatán zone of Chiapas, Mexico, the best evidence for a transition from egalitarian to rank society places the transition at about 1600 cal. BC and consists of special residential architecture, settlement hierarchies, differential consumption and production of special goods, and possible differential mortuary practices.” Also see Clark and Blake (1994) and Clark and Pye (n.d.).

21. See Ekholm (1969: 96) and Lowe (1977: 212–218). In contrast, ceramic assemblages from sites in coastal Guatemala bear little or no resemblance to Gulf Coast Olmec ceramic collections at this time (Bove 1989: 5; Demarest 1989: 315–316; Love 1999b).

22. For more detailed discussions of this Olmec horizon and its relationship to the Soconusco region, see Clark and Pye (2000), Green and Lowe (1967: 65–71), and Navarrete (1974: 17–23). For the site of La Venta, see Drucker (1952) and Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959).

23. See Ekholm (1969), Love (2002b: 193), and Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 123–127) for detailed discussions of the Duende phase, a problematic ceramic complex identified only at Izapa. Lowe, Lee, and Martínez viewed the ceramics of the Duende phase, which suggest a relationship to eastern Maya regions, as a short-lived intrusion. However, Love (2002b: 44) suggested that the vast majority of the Duende assemblage was equivalent to the Conchas (900–600 BC) assemblage defined for Pacific coastal Guatemala.

24. La Blanca went into decline by 600 BC, at which point its regional dominance may have been transferred to the site of El Ujuxte, twelve kilometers to the east (Love 2002b: 197), or to other rising regional centers such as Izapa and Takalik Abaj (Guernsey and Love 2005).

25. As Ekholm (1969: 3) observed, the wet climate of Izapa poses a major problem for archaeologists; the preservation of bone, wood, shell, and textiles is extremely poor.

26. Coe and Flannery (1967: 102) added that, by the end of the Preclassic period, evidence suggests that the only settlements remaining along the Pacific Coast were salt-producing communities. Also see Andrews (1983).

27. Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 159) included Mound 60 with Group G, to its southeast, but acknowledged that the structure functioned as a pivotal point at the intersection of several important plaza groups. Also see Gómez Rueda (1996).

28. For examples of this archetypal landscape in ancient Mesoamerica, see Broda, Carrasco, and Matos Moctezuma (1987), Manzanilla (2000), Reilly (1994: 192–233), Schele and Guernsey Kappelman (2001), Schele and Mathews (1998: 36–40), and Taube (2004).

29. As Elizabeth Pope (personal communication 2003)

observed, rulers may have capitalized on these water catchment and drainage systems as evidence of their abilities to “command” the natural environment.

30. This basin, Miscellaneous Monument 55, is accompanied slightly farther downstream by Miscellaneous Monument 56, another carved stone basin. Details preserved on Miscellaneous Monument 56 include transverse lip grooves that allowed water to flow in and out through the basin (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 281).

31. Stirling (1943: 71–72) was the first to recognize that Group F at Izapa bore marked differences from the other mound and plaza groups at the site. Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 229) determined that construction in Group F began in the Terminal Preclassic period, following the abandonment of the central groups of the site, and burgeoned during the ensuing Early Classic period.

32. Alternative dating schemes for the Izapa monuments, such as seriations of the sculpture proposed by Miles (1965) and Parsons (1986), will be discussed in Chapter 3. While the majority of scholars agree that monuments at Izapa date to the Late Preclassic period, Clark and Pye (2000: 224) and Ekholm (1969: 100) suggested an earlier Middle Preclassic date (600–500 BC) for sculpture like Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2, which is stylistically quite distinct and bears some affinities to earlier Olmec style monuments. Also see Cyphers Guillén (1982: 391) for a discussion of comparable stylistic characteristics and artifact assemblages between Izapa and the site of Chalcatzingo, in modern Morelos, Mexico, whose apogee was 700–500 BC.

33. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, Stirling (1943: 73) was the first to use the term “cult” to describe this sculptural phenomenon as it appears at Izapa. See Grove (1987: 129), however, for stela-altar pairs at Chalcatzingo that may predate those at Izapa.

34. See, for instance, Covarrubias (1946), Grove and Gillespie (1992: 31), Parsons (1986), and Proskouriakoff (1968), who date the appearance of stelae at La Venta to approximately 700 BC.

35. Reilly (1994) referred to Chalcatzingo Monuments 11, 8, 14, 15, 7, and 6 as the Water Dancing Group and discussed their participation within a narrative complex that included themes of rain, fertility, sacrifice, and bloodletting. Angulo (1987) included Monument 1 within his proposed sequence whose thematic content was focused on rain, agricultural fertility, and birth.

36. The term “stela” as applied to La Venta Stela 2 is actually a misnomer. In fact, as defined by Clancy (1990), La Venta Stela 2 is a boulder monument, perhaps transitional in the development of the stela form. A manuscript by Graham and Benson (n.d.) also addresses the development and significance of the boulder monument, particularly at Takalik Abaj.

37. Although Navarrete (1974: 11) dated the monuments at Pijijiapan to the end of the Early Preclassic period, Clark and Pérez Suárez (1994) and Clark and Pye

(2000: 220) placed them in the Middle Preclassic period based primarily on stylistic similarities to carvings from the site of La Venta.

38. Proskouriakoff (1968: 123) suggested that Kaminaljuyu Stela 9 might represent the earliest low-relief carving at Kaminaljuyu. Parsons (1986: 16) dated Stela 9 to the Middle Preclassic Las Charcas phase based on its reused context in a Providencia phase (500–200 BC) pit.

39. La Venta Offering 4 consisted of sixteen standing figurines and six celts inserted upright adjacent to the figures like stelae. Early Preclassic antecedents for this ritual behavior involving the caching of greenstone axes and other sculptural materials exists at the sites of El Manatí and La Merced (Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000; Rodríguez and Ortiz 2000).

40. McDonald (1983: 39) placed Monuments 3 and 4 in the Tusanteco phase at Tzutzuculi, between 450 and 300 BC, based on associated ceramics.

41. Also see the unusual monuments (Monuments 13, 14, and 15) from the site of Los Mangales in the Salamá Valley. Sharer and Sedat (1987: 365–366) called them “stelae” based on their shaped, rectangular contours, yet also noted that the original context of both Monuments 13 and 14 was as lintels within a crypt that dated to the Middle to Late Preclassic transition. Also noteworthy are the dot-shaped and linear incisions across the surfaces of these monuments that undoubtedly represent some early notational system.

42. Plain stelae dated to the Late Preclassic period are also known from the Maya Lowlands; see, for instance, Hammond (1982).

43. Norman (1976: 5) provides a chart of the mineral composition of selected stone monuments at Izapa.

44. Stirling (1943: 68) first observed that the highly three-dimensional form of Miscellaneous Monument 2 made it unique among the other stelae at Izapa. Norman (1976: fig. 5.27) noted that a monument from Tiltepec, near Tonalá, Chiapas, bears a strong resemblance to Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 2; however, the dating of the Tiltepec monument is uncertain.

45. Also see Lowe (1965: 57), Miles (1965: 252–255), Norman (1976: 258), and Stirling (1965: 725) for further debate concerning the dating of Miscellaneous Monument 2.

46. These Late Preclassic framing devices may trace their conceptual origins to various Middle Preclassic prototypes, such as the designs on the upper horizontal ledge of La Venta Altar 4, the designs above the paneled field of La Venta Stela 1, and the rectilinear framing device on Pijijiapan Monument 1.

47. The topic of frames and their roles has been discussed not only with regards to Izapan style monuments (Quirarte 1973, 1974) and Classic Maya sculpture (Clancy 1990: 30), but also in the broader field of art history (Nodelman 1967; Schapiro 1969).

48. This monument was not given a stela number, and

as Parsons (1986: 63) noted, it appears not to have been transported to the National Museum in Guatemala for preservation.

49. See Schele (1985) for a summary of the evidence for painted and stuccoed stelae among the Classic Maya.

50. See Clancy (1999: 126) for a discussion of the human scale of stelae compared to that of the giant stucco masks that decorated many temple facades during the Late Preclassic period in the Maya Lowlands. She posited that the transition from mask programs to stelae by the Maya may have reflected a new emphasis on the human scale and more humanly focused messages. Also see Newsome (1998: 116), who argued that the ancient Maya attributed qualities to stelae “that defined them as ‘beings’ within the scope of their ontological universe.” Like Stuart (1996), Newsome explored the role of Classic Maya stelae as “perpetual actors” that dramatized concepts of time, world order, and accession.

CHAPTER THREE

1. As Stirling (1943: 61) noted, although the archaeological site had not been given a specific name by local inhabitants, the river that flowed east of it was known as the *Arroyo Izapa*, while the plain upon which the site sat was referred to as *Los Terrenos de Izapa*.

2. Stirling refers to Takalik Abaj by an earlier name, San Isidro Piedra Parada, in this publication.

3. See Chapter 1, n. 13, for the linguistic affiliation of Takalik Abaj during the Late Preclassic period.

4. More recent analysis of the ceramics associated with the Cotzumalguapan sculptural florescence by Popenoe de Hatch (1989a) provided a solid Late Classic date for the art style. Also see Chinchilla Mazariegos (2002) for recent investigations of Cotzumalguapa.

5. See Coe (1957b: 8) for a discussion of the debate between Mayanists and Mexicanists in the first half of the twentieth century as to which region of Mesoamerica witnessed the earliest development of “high civilization.”

6. *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America*, which was published shortly after the death of Covarrubias in February 1957, serves as a compendium of many of Covarrubias’ earlier ideas about the nature of Olmec art (see, for example, Covarrubias 1942, 1943, 1946).

7. The 1955 excavations at La Venta recovered samples that provided the first reliable radiocarbon dates. See Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (1959).

8. The 1942 conference attendees included, among others, Covarrubias, Alfonso Caso, Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, Paul Kirchhoff, Enrique Palacios, Matthew Stirling, J. Eric S. Thompson, and George Vaillant.

9. Caso (1942: 43–46), translated in Diehl and Coe (1995: 22); emphasis in original.

10. See, for example, Sylvanus Morley’s (1946) *The Ancient Maya*, which enthusiastically described various objects within the corpus of Maya art as “the most beauti-

ful” example of their kind within all of Mesoamerica.

11. For summaries of these arguments see Clark (1997), Clark and Hansen (2001), and Diehl and Coe (1995: 11).

12. Also see Dixon (1959: 10), who, during this same period of time, discussed the Late Preclassic Izapan style bones from Chiapa de Corzo with respect to models of interaction and diffusion.

13. See Norman (1976: 167), who noted “Much of [Jakeman’s] work must be rendered invalid because of the inaccuracies in the Jakeman reproduction of Stela 5 which have long been evident.” Also see Clark (1999).

14. Kubler, like Proskouriakoff (1950), helped pave the way to incorporating art historical methods into broader discussions of Precolumbian art, culture, and worldview.

15. Also see Agrinier (1960: 22–24) for his discussion of the carved femora from Chiapa de Corzo first described by Dixon (1959). Agrinier noted some iconographic parallels between the femora and Izapan style monuments, attributing these similarities to shared origins in Middle Preclassic Olmec art.

16. For comparative purposes also see Willey (1962).

17. See, for example, Coe (1965: 772) and Miles (1965: 255).

18. Lowe and Mason (1965: 202) defined the Late Preclassic period, according to the ceramic chronology established for Chiapa de Corzo, as corresponding to Chiapa III, IV, and V (or roughly 550–100 BC), and the Protoclassic period as corresponding to Chiapa VI and VII (or roughly 100 BC–AD 200). See Lowe and Mason (1965: fig. 3) for their “Chronological Table for Southwestern Chiapas.”

19. Stela 10 was discovered and excavated by Gustavo Espinosa in 1955. Stela 11, just a few feet away from Stela 10 under the same floor in the level terrain between Mounds D-III-10 and D-IV-2, was discovered and excavated by Edwin Shook two years later (see Coe 1965: 772; Miles 1965: 255; Parsons 1986: 65–66).

20. Also see Borhegyi (1951), Cyphers Guillén (1982), and Hansen (1992) for further discussions of these incensarios and their distribution.

21. See Proskouriakoff (1964, 1971) for critiques of Miles’ stylistic divisions.

22. Before Parsons (1967), Orellana (1955: 162) had applied the term “Olmecoid” to sculpture at Izapa that bore a resemblance to Olmec monuments.

23. According to Parsons (1967: 184), Izapan style monuments were characterized by “relief with more rounded edges, relatively little undecorated space, scrolls which are more circular, and more stocky proportions to the human figures.” By contrast, the Proto-Maya tradition exhibited “greater refinement . . . sharp relief and . . . fine-incised detail or outlines. . . . The proportions of human figures are relatively linear and body outlines have graceful, smooth curves.”

24. Parsons (1967: 187–190, fig. 8) also addressed the chronological development of specific iconographic motifs

in these transitional art styles, focusing at length on the “profile dragon” imagery that demonstrated “graphic and conceptual” continuity from Olmec through Maya times. As Parsons acknowledged, his ideas were indebted to earlier evolutionary schemes suggested by Kidder, Jennings, and Shook (1946: fig. 97), Covarrubias (1957: fig. 36), and Agrinier (1960: fig. 6). Also see Girard (1966: 40) for parallels between deities depicted at Izapa and characters known from Postclassic Maya codices.

25. In a later study, Parsons (1969: 154) would further differentiate between this Peripheral Coastal Lowland region and the Southern Maya Highlands (or Chiapas-Guatemala volcanic uplands): “It seems more useful to link the Pacific coast even more closely with the environmentally similar and contiguous Gulf coast on the Atlantic side.”

26. In addition, Román Piña Chan (1967: 18) described Izapa as a great ceremonial center with Olmec-style sculptures that was also linked to the future development of Maya culture.

27. Ekholm (1969: 14) dated the earliest phase of Mound 30a (Structure 30a-D5) at circa 700 BC.

28. The proceedings, edited by Robert Heizer and John Graham, were published in 1971 in a volume of the same name.

29. Also see George Kubler’s (1971) commentary on Proskouriakoff’s article in the same volume, in which he too comments on the role(s) of visual imagery in ancient Mesoamerican culture.

30. Other articles in the volume, such as one by Claude Baudez, took a much more conservative stance and focused instead on questions such as whether the relationship between the Gulf Coast and southeastern Mesoamerica was one of direct contact or indirect stimulus diffusion (Baudez 1971: 83). While Baudez believed that the Izapan style had grown out of earlier Gulf Coast Olmec low-relief carving, from where it had spread to the southeast and undergone unique local development, he nonetheless hoped that a more clearly transitional phase between these two sculptural styles might someday be found. On a related note, the historically important place that Proskouriakoff (1970) defined for Izapan style monuments was reiterated in the catalog produced in the same year by Elizabeth Kennedy Easby and John F. Scott for the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition *Before Cortés: Sculpture of Middle America*, which included Izapan style monuments from Izapa, Tres Zapotes, and Kaminaljuyu. Their description of these monuments, which characterized them as “refined” and “sophisticated,” directly challenged earlier assessments of Izapan style sculpture as decadent or qualitatively inferior to Olmec or Maya sculpture (Easby and Scott 1970: 94–95).

31. It is interesting that Norman (1976: 325) noted the depiction of “deity impersonation” on some of the Izapa monuments yet, nonetheless, attributed these

actions not to rulers but, instead, to “subsidiaries such as angels, priests, or simply aspects of one supreme paternal deity.”

32. The question of astronomical and directional relationships between monuments at Izapa would be elaborated by Norman (1980) in his unpublished master’s thesis. Also during this period, Malmström (1973, 1976) published several articles in prominent scientific journals discussing the specific knowledge of magnetism by Izapans, and suggested that Izapa may have been the place where the sacred 260-day calendar was invented.

33. More conservatively, a roughly contemporary publication by Merle Greene, Robert Rands, and John Graham (1972: 376) reiterated the notion that the Izapan style was significant primarily as an intermediary between the monumental art of the Olmec and the Maya. Likewise, in his study of Olmec monumental sculpture, Clewlow (1974) included several brief references to the Izapan style, echoing Coe’s earlier assessment of it as an heir to Olmec traditions of low-relief carving.

34. Their articles appeared in a volume entitled *The Iconography of Middle American Sculpture*, which was published by the Metropolitan Museum in 1973.

35. While Kubler’s warnings were well founded, and continue to guide investigations to this day, more recent scholarship has continued to emphasize the utility of the concept of a unified Mesoamerican cultural system. As Houston and Taube (2000: 290–291 n. 5) concluded: “[T]he approach has been used time and again with fruitful results, to the reciprocal illumination of difficult and patchy sets of evidence. We suspect that such common ideas had their origin anciently, as part of a deep conceptual substrate associated with the beginnings of agriculture (and probably long before) and as a consequence of intense interaction among Mesoamerican peoples.”

36. In a similar vein, Coggins (1975) discussed the resemblance between the horizontal celestial bands on Late Preclassic Tikal Structure 5D-Sub-10-1st and certain Izapa monuments, particularly Stelae 5 and 12. She considered various scenarios that would account for these similarities, including the possibility that the celestial bands directly referenced the site of Izapa, in which case it suggested some kind of relationship between Izapa and the Maya site of Tikal, be it political, economic, or a reference to mythic ancestral ties (Coggins 1975: 74). Coggins’ suggestion was based in part on the assumption that Izapa was ethnically Maya during the Preclassic period (Coggins 1975: 18). While such similarities are now better understood as part of a greater southeastern Mesoamerican iconographic vocabulary of rulership (Guernsey n.d.), Coggins’ application of archaeological evidence for Late Preclassic networks of exchange to the problem of iconographic and stylistic overlap was innovative.

37. Quirarte expanded upon several of these ideas in his 1974 comparison of the framing bands at Izapa to the

famous sky bands that surround narrative scenes at the Classic Maya site of Palenque. While this analysis focused on the interplay between frame and central scene at both sites, his 1981 study addressed the role of framing bands in marking specific locations.

38. Lowe (1977: 236–237) also postulated a theory, now no longer well accepted, to explain why most of the Izapa monuments remained intact following the gradual abandonment of the site during the Protoclassic period, compared to monuments from other sites such as Kaminaljuyu that were frequently broken and effaced. He suggested that the lack of hieroglyphic writing on monuments at Izapa was characteristic of an “old Zoquean protocommunity value system” that stood in stark contrast to the extensive use of calendrics and inscriptions by Lowland Maya groups. Although he acknowledged the presence of monuments with inscriptions and dates in non-Maya regions in earlier periods, such as at Tres Zapotes, he suggested that this adoption and implementation of writing was short lived.

39. See Guernsey Kappelman (2002) for an alternative argument.

40. Also see Demarest (1976), who included a brief discussion of the Izapan art style within a broader study of the archaeological sequences of Chiapas during the Preclassic period. In this article, he argued for the Maya origins of the Izapan style phenomenon in direct opposition to scholars such as Coe (1965), who had emphasized the continuities with Olmec art.

41. Statistical analysis also characterized a (1984) dissertation by Martin Raish, which challenged the notion that Izapan style art formed a bridge in time between Olmec and Maya art. Raish’s (1984: 111) assertion that an “essentially new” iconographic system developed at Late Preclassic Izapa—which drew little, if any, influence from that of earlier Olmec culture—directly countered Coe’s (1962, 1977) earlier assessments of the developmental relationship between Olmec and Izapan art.

42. This determination was based on a series of traits “shared” by these two monuments from Kaminaljuyu and others at Izapa, which included iconographic features such as “scroll-eyed heads, falling water,” and stylistic sensibilities such as overlapping forms (Smith 1984: 39).

43. Parsons (1986) chose to use the nomenclature “Miraflores-Arenal” to characterize the style of monuments at Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu because it roughly corresponded to the archaeological phases at the site, which during the Terminal Preclassic were subdivided into the Verbena phase (previously called “Miraflores” by Shook and Kidder [1952]) and the Arenal phase. He further broke down the Miraflores-Arenal stylistic category, identifying a Miraflores component that was more overtly “proto-Maya” and elegant in its refinement of line and technique, and an Arenal component that was more conservative and more closely affiliated with the Izapan style

(Parsons 1986: 49–50). These points were further elaborated by Parsons (1988).

44. In contrast to Parsons, Clancy (1999: 127) noted, in her discussion of Early Classic Maya monuments, that “almost any particular icon used in the imagery of the new [Early Classic] plaza monuments can also be traced back to some Preclassic monument. Tracing such connections between the southern and lowland areas, suggested by the use of similar icons, is important in terms of the art history of a particular monument, but not as important for defining the more general history of Early Classic plaza monuments. For this, it must be acknowledged that from the start the Early Classic artist/patron consistently transformed and translated the earlier icons, taken from narrative contexts and themes, by using them in the very different compositional context.” Her viewpoint emphasizes the innovative uses of motifs that set the ensuing Early Classic period apart from the Late Preclassic, rather than the different sites from which the motifs may have been borrowed and their respective range of influences.

45. The identity of the Principal Bird Deity, whose name was first coined by Bardawil (1976), and its history of discovery in the scholarly literature will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

46. Cortez elaborated upon the earlier suggestion by Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: caption for fig. 2.2) that the bird on monuments at Izapa might be a prototype for Seven Macaw in the *Popol Vuh*, a topic that will be addressed further in Chapter 5.

47. Prater (1989: 127–128, fig. 6.4) also included in this category a sculptural fragment from Kaminaljuyu.

48. Barba de Piña Chan’s iconographic insights into the imagery of Izapa Stela 25, for instance, will be discussed in Chapter 5.

49. In a general sense, Kaplan was responding to earlier suggestions by Proskouriakoff (1971), Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 95), and Cortez (1986) that Izapan style monuments were invested with socially and politically charged imagery.

50. Also see Kaplan (2000) for an elaboration on the iconography of thrones and rulership at Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu, as well as Kaplan (2001, 2002) for patterns of exchange between Kaminaljuyu and Izapa during this period.

51. Taube (1995: 91–94) also revisited Quirarte’s original work on the iconography of the framing bands on several Izapa stelae, relating the horizontal devices to a Middle Preclassic celestial and rain-making iconographic complex.

52. As Laughton (1997: 188) noted, this suggestion grew out of an earlier proposal by Stuart and Houston (1994: 64) that the origins of Classic Maya toponymic references might be traced to sites such as Izapa. As Stuart and Houston observed, the bottom registers of Stelae 1, 22, 23, and 54 depict bands of water typically bound by

zoomorphic heads decorated by scrolls and volutes, which suggests that “one of the place names in use at the site may have been ‘misty water.’” They cautioned, however, that “in contrast to the bands from the southern Lowlands, those from sites on the Pacific piedmont pose a near insuperable obstacle for further investigation: they are unaccompanied by texts and are thus unlikely to be anything other than a subject for conjecture.”

53. Also see Grove (2000) and Guernsey (n.d.) for discussions of specific framing band motifs.

54. In any discussion of the refinement of the execution of line, it must be remembered that qualitative differences do not necessarily reflect the relative skills of artisans or scribes; discernible differences are also quite often the result of such variable characteristics as the hardness and density of each unique stone.

55. See, for instance, Reents-Budet, Bishop, and MacLeod (1994) and Tate (1992: 38–49).

56. Coggins (1975: 36) made a similar point in her discussion of Late Preclassic monumental traditions: “In the Middle and Late Pre-Classic periods monumental art was carved in stone all along this Olmec, or Olmecoid, route—from the Gulf Coast, south across Chiapas, along the Pacific Coast, in El Salvador, and in the Guatemalan Highlands. Although there are regional stylistic differences there is a basic conceptual vocabulary, and a cosmology from which all this art derives.”

57. Of course, the fact that many of the stylistic and iconographic traits characterizing Late Preclassic monuments in southeastern Mesoamerica have antecedents in the Middle Preclassic period and also persist well into the Classic Period poses further challenges to scholars. As such, the traits are not necessarily useful temporal or ethnic markers, but rather speak to the relatively conservative canons of style, form, and iconography that characterize much of Mesoamerican art.

58. For an excellent presentation of the concept and uses of style in archaeological literature, see the edited volume by Conkey and Hastorf (1990).

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Throughout this book, rulers on Izapa monuments are typically referred to as “he” or, in other words, of being of the male sex. During the Late Preclassic period, attention seems to have been given, in many cases, to indicating the biologically determined sex of women. For example, breasts are often included on representations of women; see the kneeling female figure with a pendulous breast on Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 (fig. 1.5), or the bare-chested women in the murals at San Bartolo (O’Neill 2002; Saturno et al. 2001). This tradition extended back at least as far as the Middle Preclassic period, as evidenced by Chalcatzingo Monument 21, with its depiction of a woman in profile with clearly delineated breasts (Cyphers Guillén 1984).

Because all of the proposed representations of Izapa rulers included in this discussion lack any overtly female sexual characteristics, it is assumed that they represent figures of the male sex. This is not to negate the fact, however, that gender—which is culturally determined—is much more difficult to ascertain in the art or archaeology of this time period, and appears to have been a very fluid category. Therefore, while the practice of using terms such as “he” or “him” to describe the rulers at Izapa is problematic, it appears to be the most reasonable assumption based on our current, and constantly expanding, understanding of expressions of sex and gender during the Preclassic period. For more critical readings on this subject in ancient Mesoamerica, see Joyce (2000) and the edited volume by Ardren (2002).

2. See Cyphers Guillén (1982: 384) for the archaeological context of Chalcatzingo Monument 21, which provided dates of 600–500 BC, as well as a discussion of the similarity between ground lines on monuments at Izapa and Chalcatzingo.

3. A similar motif also appears in the Maya Lowlands during the Late Preclassic period on the northern basal mask of Structure 1 at Nakbe, Guatemala (Hansen 1992: 93), and on the upper western mask of Structure 5C-2nd at Cerros, Belize (Schele and Freidel 1990). In both of these Maya examples, the motif functions as part of the headdress of giant zoomorphic masks. Despite its similarity to the terrestrial symbols at Late Preclassic sites in different linguistic regions, its context in the Maya heartland is remarkably different and appears to reference instead the cloth bands that were used to bind headdresses onto divine beings and rulers (Guernsey n.d.).

4. Also see Reilly (1995: 37–38).

5. See Guernsey Kappelman (1997: 133–137) for a more in-depth discussion of possible Middle Preclassic antecedents for Late Preclassic avian imagery including an obsidian core from Complex A at La Venta (cf. Reilly 1994: 172), an incised celt from Chalcatzingo (photographed in *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership* 1995: 229), and a figurine from Arroyo Pesquero (Benson 1971; Reilly 1994: 191–192).

6. The mural measures 3.8 m in width and 2.5 m in height, and was painted approximately 10 m above the foot of the cliff wall, directly over the opening of the south grotto, or shallow cavelike opening (Grove 1970: 8).

7. For a color reconstruction of this mural, see that by Felipe Dávalos in Grove (1970: frontispiece).

8. Grove (1970: 10) first observed that the zoomorphic face upon which the individual is seated is equivalent to Olmec monumental stone altars, such as La Venta Altar 4.

9. The standing figure on the Alvarado stela (Winfield Capitaine 1990: fig. 19) makes a similar gesture (John Clark, personal communication 2003). Matthew Looper (personal communication 2003) suggests that the posture of the protagonists in these scenes, with one arm up and

one arm down, might visually emphasize the role of the ruler as a communicator between earth and sky.

10. The term “ideology” is a complex one. In this book, I follow the definition employed by Sharer and Ashmore (1987: 406) in their discussion of the term with regards to Mesoamerica and its artistic record: “Ideology encompasses the belief and value system of a society. Religious beliefs come most readily to mind as examples of ideological systems, but art styles and other symbolic records also provide information about the ways human groups have codified their outlook on existence.” This definition accords with Geertz’s (1983) notions of religion as, in part, the formulation of a general order of existence that is predicated on a system of symbols, motivating behaviors, and ritual. My use of the term, however, extends beyond religious beliefs or value systems to also dovetail with the realm of politics, or encompass those ideological systems that have political implications (cf. Demarest 1992: 4). Yet, even this definition that integrates notions of religion, worldview, and politics is inadequate, as it does not necessarily take into consideration the dynamic nature of ideological development and change over time and across space (Hodder 1991). Moreover, as Love (1999a: 129) aptly noted, this definition also privileges “the symbolic expression of dominant ideologies, or what James Scott has called ‘Official Transcripts’ (Scott 1990),” and does not accommodate the various ways in which dominant ideologies may have been contested in other social and economic domains. This caveat is particularly important to note because, throughout this study, I emphasize those aspects of ideology that were—and remain—visually accessible in the monumental artistic record, which was commissioned by ruling elites and that very clearly represents a limited, even biased, ideological vision.

11. A very similar message is conveyed at the site of Chalcatzingo in modern Morelos, Mexico, on Relief 1, which depicts a Middle Preclassic ruler seated within a quatrefoil niche eliciting rain (Grove 1984; Reilly 1995).

12. Grove (1981: 66) identified this rope as a lineage symbol, as did Guernsey Kappelman and Reilly (2001: 41), who discussed the twisted cord as a symbolic umbilicus or supernatural conduit. Whether an equivalent image existed on the opposite side of Altar 4 cannot be determined due to extensive damage.

13. The interior of the niche on Altar 4 is covered in an incised design that may represent feathers. More generally, a long history of scholarship concerning the identification of niches and caves as supernatural portals exists. See, for instance, Bassie-Sweet (1996), Brady and Ashmore (1999), Christenson (2001), Grove (1970: 11), Heyden (1975), Stirling (1943: 54), and Stone (1995).

14. For comparative purposes, also see representations of Olmec “flying figures” as discussed by Reilly (1994: 191) and Tate (1995: 63).

15. A recently discovered (Tejada 1993) plaque from

the area around Motozintla, Chiapas, dated to the end of the Middle Preclassic period (Clark and Pye 2000: 226, fig. 12b), may also fit into this equation. The serpentine plaque depicts two avian-costumed individuals engaged in conversation. As Clark and Pye (2000: 226) stated, Olmec imagery portrays individuals wearing elite regalia like this plaque, which suggests that it was once the costume accessory of an elite individual or ruler. Also of note is the plaque’s origin in the Soconusco region near the town of Motozintla, which as Clark and Pye (2000: 226) noted, “is located just on the inland side of the major pass from the southern Chiapas coast into the interior river valleys on the northern side of the Sierra Madre.”

16. Also see the entries for figures 42–50 in *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership* (1995).

17. See Guernsey Kappelman and Reilly (2001) for a discussion of the possible relationship between jaguarian and avian transformation during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods.

18. Also see Clark (1991: 13), who discussed a possible Early Preclassic precedent for this phenomenon in Ocós phase figurines from the Soconusco region of Chiapas, where enthroned figurines appear with animal costumes. As Clark asserted, these figurines may indicate that the foundations for rank or power in Early Preclassic Soconusco chiefdoms rested on a shaman/chief’s ability to communicate with the supernatural realm.

19. Reilly (1994: 60) also addressed how the conceptual foundations of a shamanic belief system worked in concert with models that emphasized the economic basis for stratified social order. His discussion of celts, in particular, demonstrated how economic control of limited resources such as greenstone went hand in hand with the appearance, during the Middle Preclassic period, of these shamanically based ideologies on the celts themselves.

20. See, for instance, Klein et al. (2002) for a summary of arguments against employing a shamanic model to interpret ancient Mesoamerican religious and artistic systems; also see Kehoe (1996) for similar arguments concerning Native North American religious systems.

21. Also see Brown (1975) and Reilly (1994) for discussions of the role of shamanism in structuring ancient chiefdoms in the southeastern United States during the Mississippian period (AD 900–1600).

22. See, for instance, Demarest (1992), Freidel and Schele (1988a), Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993), Houston (2000), Houston and Stuart (1996), Martin and Grube (2000), Schele and Freidel (1990), and Schele and Miller (1986).

23. Townsend (1979: 28) defined *teotl* as “a numinous, impersonal force diffused throughout the universe,” as opposed to its frequent, yet incorrect, translation as “god” (Houston and Stuart 1996: 292).

24. Also see Houston and Stuart (1989) and Grube and Nahm (1994).

CHAPTER FIVE

1. Although the narratives of Stelae 4 and 60 appear to be closely related, Stela 60 was removed from its original location anciently and relocated to Group F at Izapa; its original context is unknown.

2. Fahsen (2000: 90–91) identified the individual on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 as a ruler based, in part, on the presence of an early version of the *ajaw* “lord” glyph on his skirt.

3. It is interesting to note that an eccentric flint was actually recovered from Late Preclassic Tomb I of Mound E-III-3 at Kaminaljuyu. Such evidence provides solid archaeological documentation for the implements wielded by Late Preclassic rulers in the artistic record.

4. Hansen (1992: 126) likewise suggested that Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 depicts a ruler whose ritual costume makes overt references to the Principal Bird Deity.

5. Maudslay included bird imagery from the sites of Palenque, Copán, Tikal, and Quirigua in his discussion.

6. Spinden’s corpus of birds included imagery from Palenque, Yaxchilán, Copán, Piedras Negras, and the *Codex Nuttall*.

7. It was Schele and Miller (1986: 43–45) who first recognized that the “serpent wings” referred to by Maudslay, Spinden, and others were “personified” versions of wings, in which the wings were merged with personification heads. As they stated, “The personification head carries no specific inherent meaning beyond the concept of force. When it is attached to an object—a wristlet, an earflare or a cloth sash, for example—the personification head signals that these objects have accumulated sacred power” (Schele and Miller 1986: 44). This tendency to personify objects, particularly those imbued with divine power, characterizes much of Classic Maya art.

8. Schele expanded upon many of these ideas in a later publication coauthored with David Freidel (Schele and Freidel 1990).

9. An alphabetic version of the *Popol Vuh*, probably transcribed from an earlier hieroglyphic version that recorded even more ancient oral traditions, was first translated into Spanish between 1701 and 1703 in Chichicastenango, Guatemala, by a friar named Francisco Ximénez, and now resides in the Newberry Library in Chicago (D. Tedlock 1985: 28).

10. It should also be noted that in an unpublished 1980 Senior Honors Thesis, “The Deer and Vulture in Classic Maya Religion,” Karl Taube suggested that the Principal Bird Deity was an antecedent of Seven Macaw of the K’iche’ Maya *Popol Vuh*. Moreover, in 1950 Blom had noted that the famous Blom plate from Quintana Roo—which depicts a bird flanked by two blowgunners—recalls the frequent blowgun scenes described throughout the *Popol Vuh*. Although Blom (1950: 81) duly noted the shared blowgunner theme, he failed to make a specific con-

nection, adding: “I have made a quick but unsuccessful search of the *Popol Vuh* to find a passage which would describe this scene.”

11. For an alternative argument that links the serpent often seen descending from the mouth or talons of the Principal Bird Deity to an iconographic convention with Middle Preclassic precedents, see Guernsey Kappelman and Reilly (2001).

12. It may be worth noting, however, that macaws, when threatened or annoyed, often utter a hissing sound like a snake (Sick 1993: 257), which could perhaps explain the association of the Principal Bird Deity, if indeed a macaw, with snakes.

13. Also see Hansen (1992: 122–140), who addressed the varying representations of the Principal Bird Deity in Late Preclassic and Early Classic art. For example, he pointed to the Early Classic facade at the site of Acanceh, which depicts a variety of birds that may be related to a larger iconographic complex involving the Principal Bird Deity. Alternately, the variety of birds represented on the facade may provide a key to understanding the multiple manifestations of avian deities during the Early Classic period. Ultimately, as noted early on by Tozzer and Allen (1910: 346), the specific identity of birds in Mesoamerican art is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain.

14. These points are further developed in Chapter 7.

15. Taube (1987, 1988, 1994) noted depictions of the Principal Bird Deity in accession and sacrificial contexts on Piedras Negras Stelae 6, 11, 14, 25, and 33, and an unprovenienced Classic-period incised bone (see fig. 5.15).

16. Very early on Coe (1965: 753) commented on the frequency and significance of “bird-monster” representations in Olmec and Early Classic Maya art.

17. Barba de Piña Chan (1990: 55, 105–107) also discussed the stela imagery as “moral lessons” that illustrated passages from the *Popol Vuh* and served as didactic tools for the “teacher-priests of Izapa.”

18. See Hellmuth (1986: figs. 131a–d) for further examples of Classic-period Principal Bird Deities wearing floral diadems.

19. The *akbal* sign on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 compares closely to an *akbal* glyph on a small limestone panel found in a Horcones (Terminal Preclassic) phase cache at Chiapa de Corzo (see Lee 1969: fig. 66e).

20. Kaminaljuyu Altars 9 and 10 are cylindrical in shape, approximately two feet in height, and are supported by low, cylindrical tripods. Although referred to as “altars,” their cylindrical shape and size suggests that they may have functioned instead as the legs of an altar (Linda Schele, personal communication 1997).

21. As Christenson (2003) further noted, there is a strong correlation between notions of time and divinity in highland Maya culture.

22. Despite the frequent association of these personified wings with the Principal Bird Deity during the Late

Preclassic and Classic periods, Taube (1987) rightly noted that the device can also appear with other avian creatures, such as hummingbirds, owls, and waterbirds, and may function as a generic “celestial” or “sky” marker rather than as a specific diagnostic trait of the Principal Bird Deity (cf. Spinden 1975: 60–63).

23. Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (1999: 304) suggested that Tombs I and II in Mound E-III-3 at Kaminaljuyu probably correspond to two consecutive rulers.

24. For comparative purposes, also see Marcus and Flannery (1996: 169–170), who describe a Late Preclassic Monte Alban Ic (300 BC–c. AD 100/150) ceramic effigy jar from the site of Tomaltepec, located approximately fifteen kilometers east of Monte Alban, which depicts a seated human figure wearing a macaw mask.

25. The same holds true, as Miles (1965: 255) first noted, for the relationship between the flint ax wielded by the individual on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 and an eccentric flint recovered from Tomb I in Mound E-III-3 (Shook and Kidder 1952: fig. 79c).

26. The towering headdress on Stela 11 further alludes to the supernatural capabilities of the figure portrayed. Above the beaked headdress is another zoomorphic mask whose forehead transforms into a World Tree, or symbolic *axis mundi*, that marks a path of communication between the natural and supernatural realms. This headdress on Kaminaljuyu bears a striking resemblance to those worn by rulers on La Mojarra Stela 1, Cerro de las Mesas Stela 5, the San Miguel Chapultepec stela, and the Dumbarton Oaks pectoral and in Loltun cave. This was clearly a common type of headdress during the Late Preclassic period that connoted a ruler's abilities to enter into supernatural communication (Guernsey Kappelman 1997: 119–120).

27. See Termer (1973: fig. 37) for the original photo. Parsons (1986: 35–36) published a postreconstruction photo of the Palo Gordo monument and based his interpretation of the zoomorph as a feline on this faulty reconstruction. The bicephalic serpent clenched in the beak of the Palo Gordo monument compares closely to similar serpents disseminated by the Principal Bird Deity on numerous Late Preclassic– and Classic-period monuments (see Guernsey Kappelman 1997; Guernsey Kappelman and Reilly 2001).

28. Also see the floral form that appears in the headdress and in front of the mouth of the young deity on the Late Preclassic Diker Bowl (cf. Houston and Taube 2000: 273, fig. 3c).

29. Beyond these iconographic parallels, the hieroglyphic inscription on La Mojarra Stela 1 may also allude to the significance of Late Preclassic avian transformation rituals. According to the proposed decipherment by Justeson and Kaufman (1993, 1996; Kaufman and Justeson 2001), the lengthy text of La Mojarra Stela 1 describes a series of events associated with astronomical phenomena, calendrical anniversaries, and the accession ceremony of a

ruler. In one passage, the inscription records a ritual in which certain objects were “taken” by the ruler “in plain sight” or, by extension, “in public” (Kaufman and Justeson 2001: 51). One of the objects taken by the ruler during this public spectacle was a “macaw lashing” (Kaufman and Justeson 2001: 50). Justeson and Kaufman's decipherment thus indicates that one aspect of the ritual at La Mojarra involved the presentation of a macaw “lassing” or bound object to the ruler, and the acceptance of this object was central to the public display of rulership. The significance of the expression “taking the macaw lashing” appears to be clarified later in the narrative in a passage that Justeson and Kaufman interpreted as the ruler's “arrayal as a macaw.” This passage culminates by stating that the ruler—arrayed as the macaw—addressed his audience and proclaimed his status as ruler (Kaufman and Justeson 2001: 62). In other words, Justeson and Kaufman's interpretation of this portion of the La Mojarra narrative implies that the ruler's performance culminated in his public declaration of rulership *only* after he donned a macaw costume. The text of La Mojarra Stela 1, according to Justeson and Kaufman's decipherment, thus suggests that the avian costuming by the ruler was the climax of a public performance in which he declared his kingly authority. As such, it offers a potential verbal parallel to the visual imagery at Izapa that depicts individuals actually engaged in rituals costumed as birds, despite ongoing analysis of the text and related inscriptions. While this potential textual parallel will remain less secure until further testing of Justeson and Kaufman's decipherment is possible, the iconographic analogies are crystal clear. In fact, even if one rejects the proposed translation of the text of La Mojarra Stela 1, its imagery incontestably figures into any discussion of Late Preclassic representations of rulers costumed and performing in the persona of the Principal Bird Deity. For alternative analyses and critical evaluations of Justeson and Kaufman's proposed translation of the La Mojarra inscription, see Anderson (1993), Houston (2000: 131), Houston and Coe (2003), and Méluzin (1995).

30. Also see Sosa (1989: 140).

31. See Garza (1983, 2:38).

32. Personal communication from Marc Zender, October 2002, who pointed to examples of this spelling at Xcalumkin and Toniná. On the famous “Blowgunner Vase,” the bird carries the name *Itzamnaaj* followed by an undeciphered compound logograph. Elsewhere on a stucco at Toniná, a bird that performs in a role similar to that of Seven Macaw of the *Popol Vuh* bears the title *Chan Mo' Nal*, or “Four Macaw,” an appellation that also appears in the Dresden Codex (p. 40) in conjunction with a distinctly macawlike character. According to Zender, such evidence strongly implies that, during the Classic period, the bird could carry several different titles. In fact, as several epigraphers have recently suggested, there is evidence to suggest that during the Classic period several versions of a Princi-

pal Bird Deity may have existed, each of which bore a distinct title and was associated with different iconographic complexes, yet may have been conceptually related to an overarching complex of avians that functioned as deities and messengers (Carrasco n.d.; Houston 2000: 174–175; Hull n.d.; cf. Miller 1956: 211). This epigraphic evidence supports Bassie-Sweet's (n.d.) suggestion that, during the Classic period, one of these avian characters may have carried an identity as a laughing falcon.

33. Also see Hellmuth's (1987: 198–205) discussion of another Classic-period vessel that, according to him, depicts the metamorphosis of God D into a variant of the Principal Bird Deity, which he interpreted as a scene "indicating the death of God D and his apotheosis as a supernatural bird."

34. Hellmuth (1987: fig. 182 caption) tentatively identified this figure as God N, but conceded that it could possibly represent God D. More recently, David Stuart (personal communication cited in Bassie-Sweet n.d.) suggested that, based on substitutions in the nominal phrases of Itzamnaaj and God N, they may, in fact, be manifestations of the same deity.

35. This vessel, which features Itzamnaaj and his *way* the bird, recalls Houston and Stuart's (1989: 8) discussion of the relationship between God K and his serpent *way*. As they noted, God K is frequently juxtaposed to his serpent co-essence that appears as a large, coiled serpent attached to his foot. Oftentimes, God K himself is actually quite diminutive, or completely absent, in comparison to the prominent *way* serpent.

36. A similar *Itzamnaaj*-? appellation appears in the inscription on a panel from Toniná illustrated in Martin and Grube (2000: 188) (Marc Zender, personal communication October 2002).

37. As mentioned in note 31 above, the bird on the Toniná stucco carries the appellation *Chan Mo' Nal*, or "Four Macaw," indicating either that the bird could carry different titles and names or that there was more than one version of the Principal Deity during the Classic period.

38. See Fash (1991, 1998: 230–232) and Kowalski and Fash (1991). Fash (1998: 230–232) discussed the repeated macaw iconography found in the various phases of the Copán ballcourt.

39. Guernsey Kappelman (1997: 48–53) and Miller and Samayoa (1998: 64) commented on the references to the Principal Bird Deity that appear within depictions of the Maize God's death and resurrection. Both narratives, that of the Principal Bird Deity and the Maize God, were part of a larger creation story filled with imbricating cycles of death and renewal.

40. For a discussion of the metaphoric symbolism of serpent cords and umbilici, see Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993), Guernsey Kappelman (1997), Guernsey Kappelman and Reilly (2001),Looper and Guernsey Kappelman (2001), Miller (1974), and Taube (1994). Heather Orr

(personal communication 2003) noted that the imagery of a staff emerging from a vessel, as on Izapa Stela 25, presages that of Pakal's sarcophagus at Palenque in which a World Tree emerges from the sacrificial plate/Quadruplicate Badge (cf. Cortez 1986: 75).

41. Recall that the Mixe version of the myth recorded by Lipp (1991: 75) accorded the defeat of the Mixean counterpart of the Principal Bird Deity to a successful arrow shot.

42. Nose-piercing ceremonies figure notably into the narratives of the Mixtec codices as well as Aztec rituals of investiture. See Byland and Pohl (1994: 138–150) for a discussion of this phenomenon as a symbol of external or foreign legitimacy. Villela and Koontz (1993) also provided a summary of nose piercing and its significance in ancient Mesoamerica.

43. For example, see Coe (1989: 161–162) for a discussion of a sixteenth-century performance by the K'ekchi' Maya held in conjunction with the founding of a new village and the assertion of authority by the local cacique, which included the reenactment of stories from the *Popol Vuh* (as described in Estrada Monroy 1979: 168–174). There is also an intriguing parallel with a ceremony described within the inscriptions of Temple XIX of Palenque. As described by David Stuart in a presentation at the annual Maya Meetings at the University of Texas in Austin in March 2002, one text describes the cosmic accession of GI of the Palenque Triad, who acceded under the auspices of the deity Itzamnaaj. The corresponding imagery depicts the Palenque ruler K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb' costumed as GI, and a subordinate dressed in the costume of Itzamnaaj, replete with a Principal Bird Deity headdress. Such evidence clearly indicates that mythic narratives involving Itzamnaaj and the bird were invoked in performances that re-created cosmic accessions.

44. See Grove and Gillespie (1992: 27) for a similar discussion with regards to the Middle Preclassic period.

45. With such a limited corpus of monuments, it is difficult to tease apart further the ways in which Late Preclassic rulers contacted the supernatural realm and invoked Itzamnaaj and the Principal Bird Deity through ritual. There are, however, interesting differences in the depiction of these events at various sites. At Izapa, for instance, Stela 4 takes a much more narrative approach, in which the ruler appears to be portrayed first in the terrestrial world and then transformed in the celestial sphere. This presentation of "before" and "after" images, in which stages within the process of transformation are literally recorded, recalls Middle Formative jaguar transformation figurines, which likewise sought to capture the process of transformation. The same is true of the Early Classic stuccoed vessel from Kaminaljuyu that contrasts Itzamnaaj's anthropomorphic form to a more avian one: again, the process, or stages of transformation, appear to be emphasized through the narrative format of the imagery. This more narrative format,

however, contrasts with that of Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, which merely implies—through the Principal Bird Deity headdress worn by the ruler and the presence of the avian deity above him—a ritual sequence in which the ruler contacted the supernatural realm in the persona of the bird. Likewise, the imagery at La Mojarra and Takalik Abaj portrays the ruler in the guise of the bird, implying a sequence of ritual events or transformation that was not overtly illustrated. Such differences make it exceedingly difficult to determine whether the depictions represent “transformation,” as defined by scholars working on Middle Formative material, for instance, or “impersonation” as defined by Classic-period epigraphers. Unless a more expansive corpus of Late Preclassic monuments can one day be established, these issues will remain problematic.

CHAPTER SIX

1. As Wheatley (1971: 225–267) further addressed, sacred centers also often stood in testimony to a centralized control of large pools of labor, resource exploitation, and other economic factors, beyond their symbolic associations.

2. See, for instance, Broda (1991), Carrasco (1987), Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993: 124–172), Gómez Rueda (1995: 10), Matos Moctezuma (1987), Reilly (1994: 192–233), Schele and Guernsey Kappelman (2001), and Schele and Mathews (1998: 36–40).

3. Gómez Rueda (1995: 10–12) suggested that, at Preclassic sites, hydraulic systems should be viewed not only as practical solutions but as mechanisms for social integration or ceremony. Also see Manzanilla (2000).

4. See, for example, the image of Chaak on p. 42c of the Dresden Codex. Izapa Stela 1 also compares to Takalik Abaj Stela 1, which probably depicts Chaak with a voluted forehead that recalls other Late Preclassic representations of the deity (cf. Taube 1995: 95–99). A number of scholars suggested that the figure on Izapa Stela 1 was a god of fishing, perhaps related to the deity Chaak; see, for instance, Coe (1962), Girard (1966), Miles (1965), Norman (1976), and Taube (1992).

5. During the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods, there is some evidence to suggest that God K and Chaak shared attributes and were conceptually related, as Taube (1992: 76–78) discussed. For instance, compare the deity on Izapa Stela 3 to an Early Classic version of Chaak depicted on Tikal Stela 1 (see Taube 1992: fig. 37c).

6. There is ongoing debate concerning the use and psychoactive properties of bufotenine, one of the agents found within the venom of *Bufo marinus* toads. Davis and Weil (1992) argued that bufotenine is not psychoactive, does not cross the blood-brain barrier effectively, and contains toxic agents too dangerous for human consumption. However, more recent research by McBride (2000) argues that bufotenine is indeed psychoactive in the brain and can cross the human blood-brain barrier when combined with

a high concentration of epinephrine, which is also not only found in the venom of *Bufo marinus* but actually increases the permeability of the blood-brain barrier. Ongoing research by McBride explores the biotransformation of the toxic components in the *Bufo marinus* venom during fermentation processes, which may render it less noxious and more tolerable (Mike McBride, personal communication 2002). Also see Ott (2001) for further evidence of bufotenine's psychoactivity as well as its ability to cross the blood-brain barrier.

7. See Guernsey Kappelman (2000) for a more extensive discussion of these toad altars. Izapa contained two additional toad altars, Altars 53 and 54, which were moved anciently (Norman 1976: 240–248). Other Late Preclassic sites, such as Takalik Abaj and Kaminaljuyu, among others, also possessed strikingly similar toad altars (see Orrego Corzo 1990: 54; Parsons 1986: figs. 129–132).

8. This concept of altars also undoubtedly extended to plain altars as well as those carved with different imagery; all “performed” in the ritual space of Izapa's site center.

9. Norman (1976: 243) suggested that Stela 4 may have originally been paired with Altar 3, which was placed by Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: fig. 8.1) in front of adjacent Stela 7. Altar 3 was not discovered immediately in front of either stela, although Stirling (1943: 65) suggested, based on its position at the time of his investigations, that it was more closely associated with Stela 7. Norman's arguments, which were reiterated by Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 173), are based on the stylistic similarities between Altar 3 and Stela 4, both of which depict avian characters and both of which incorporate an in-turning ground line. However, the parallel relationship between Stelae 4 and 2, which face each other across the Group A plaza and do not have associated altars, suggests that Stirling's original suggestion has more merit, and that Altar 3 should, indeed, be placed with Stela 7 rather than Stela 4. Nonetheless, as Lowe, Lee, and Martínez (1982: 173) cautioned, the possibility will always exist that the toad altars (Altars 53 and 54) relocated to Group F during the Early Classic period may have originally been associated with one or more of the stelae without altars in Group A.

10. Only one other stela in Group A, Stela 27 at the base of Mound 57, lacked an altar.

11. Espinosa retrieved Stela 10, in three fragments, from the pit at his maximum depth of 125 cm. Two years later, when Shook reentered the pit, he found Stela 11 at a depth of 146 cm. As Parsons (1986: 66) explained, “However, between 96 and 140 cm there were fourteen thin adobe and sand floors, with Stela 11 lying underneath them. According to Shook, the pottery above 125 cm had Arenal as the latest type, mixed with Verbena; he thus concluded that Stela 10 was either late Verbena or very early Arenal. That three-piece monument must have been situated within and above the adobe floors. Sparse pottery below the floors, associated with Stela 11, contained cer-

tain Verbena types and only several possible Arenal sherds. Given the clear stratigraphic separation, Stela 11 has to be somewhat earlier than Stela 10, and was doubtless carved in Verbena times.”

12. It is also interesting to note that portions of Mound D-III-1 were encrusted with inlaid disks of obsidian. See Girard (1966: plate 197), Miles (1963), Ohi et al. (1994: fig. 5), Parsons (1986: 80, fig. 187), and Stone (1972: 90–91). Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (1999: 307) discussed the marked changes in architectural style and ceramics that differentiate the Early Classic Aurora phase from the preceding Late Preclassic period.

13. The original location of Kaminaljuyu Altars 9 and 10, which fit into this postulated conceptual program, is likewise unknown; they were recovered from an Arenal phase sculpture dump at the edges of the now extinct lake.

14. For more in-depth discussions of the symbolism of these twisted cords, see Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993: 99–107), Guernsey Kappelman and Reilly (2001), Klein (1982), Looper and Guernsey Kappelman (2001), Taube (1994), and Tozzer (1907: 153–154).

15. This is not to say that there was no variability as the result of differing latitudinal locations or atmospheric conditions in Mesoamerica. Likewise, the phenomenon of precession—or the gradual migration of the celestial poles and celestial equator among the stars (see Aveni 2001: 99–103)—must also be taken into consideration.

16. See Broda (1991: 79) for a definition of cosmivision as “notions of nature and society that were combined into a coherent structural whole and were characterized precisely by this intimate fusion between the exact observation of nature, on the one hand, and myth, magic, and ritual on the other.”

17. The Mound 30 acropolis was the largest construction at Izapa in terms of area, measuring approximately 200 x 140 meters at its base. Its average height was 3 meters, and it supported a central pyramid, Mound 30a, and eight additional secondary platforms (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 179).

18. The earliest-known construction of the Mound 30a pyramid dates to the Duende phase before 600 BC (Ekholm 1969; Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 184, 194). A Late Preclassic burial beneath the Mound 30e platform contained an offering of jade beads and is indicative of the significance that this group held as the location of the earliest ritual activity at the site.

19. Norman (1976: 262–265) described these monuments in detail.

20. See also Pearson and Richards (1994: 12) for a cross-cultural discussion of the domestic hearth as a symbol of the world center.

21. Two fragments of Stela 22 were found during construction of a local highway (Norman 1976: 127). A third, separately cataloged fragment, was recognized as part of Stela 22 by Ayax Moreno, who incorporated it into his

recent drawing of the monument (John Clark, personal communication 2000). Stela 67 was reused as a building stone in the north playing wall of the later ballcourt in Group F (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 226).

22. See, for example, the beards worn by the individuals depicted on Izapa Stela 11, Kaminaljuyu Stelae 10 and 19, and Monument J-41 from Building J at Monte Alban (Guernsey Kappelman 1997: 143). As Taube (1996: 62) observed, Izapa Stela 11 may also portray a variation on the theme of the Maize God’s rebirth, as the bearded protagonist emerges—with arms outstretched in a position much like that of the figures on Stelae 22 and 67—from a toad-like beast. Very similar stone scepters to those portrayed on Izapa Stela 67 were recovered archaeologically in a Hato phase (50 BC–AD 100) urn burial from Izapa (Lowe, Lee, and Martínez 1982: 70, fig. 4.11), and in an urn burial of the same date at the site of El Sitio, Guatemala (Shook 1965: fig. 1d).

23. This is well documented during the Classic period, such as on Copán Stela H, where the ruler 18–Rabbit is depicted in the jade skirt of the Maize God (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 277–278).

CHAPTER SEVEN

1. During Precolumbian times, the natural habitat of the Scarlet Macaw probably encompassed much of southeastern Mexico, portions of Guatemala, Belize, Chiapas, southern Oaxaca along the Pacific Coast, and the Atlantic coastal zone of Mexico between southern Tamaulipas and Campeche, and extended into portions of Central and South America. The Scarlet Macaw’s natural habitat is characterized by secluded dense forest and occasional patchy clearings especially along river edges, usually in regions with elevations below 400 meters. To this day, the Scarlet Macaw can be seen on rare occasions in Mexico, especially in the Selva Lacandona, in southern Belize, and in western Peten Guatemala. See Alvarez del Toro (1971: 81), Blake (1953: 192), Ceballos and Márquez Valdelamar (2000: 216), Davis (1972: 52), Edwards (1972: 78, 1998: 56), Pasquier (1982: 250–253), and Schlesinger (2001: 212).

2. From Bandelier (1890: 61), cited in Hargrave (1970: 1); Pohl (2001: 95); and Schroeder (1968: 99). As Hargrave elaborated, Cabeza de Vaca did not specify the type of “parrot” to which he was referring, although his description matches archaeological evidence of macaw trading in this region as described below. Schroeder noted that the Rodríguez-Chamuscado expedition of 1581–1582 recorded a gift of bonnets made of many macaw feathers in the vicinity of modern El Paso, Texas.

3. Quote from Wyllys (1931: 129), cited in Hargrave (1970: 1). As Hargrave noted, San Xavier del Bac is located approximately fourteen kilometers southwest of modern Tucson, Arizona.

4. For a comprehensive osteological analysis of macaw remains, see Hargrave (1970).

5. For other evidence from the Anasazi, Sinagua, Mogollon, Mimbres, and Hohokam cultural regions, see the summary in Hargrave (1970: 28–54).

6. Hargrave (1970: 9) noted that macaws have been known to live in captivity for fifty years or more; Sick (1993: 262) documented a captive Scarlet Macaw of sixty-four years of age. In the archaeological record, a Scarlet Macaw of advanced age was recovered from Pueblo Bonito (Hargrave 1970: 30).

7. See, for instance, Tozzer and Allen (1910).

8. Flannery (1976: 340), Flannery and Winter (1976: 39), and Marcus and Flannery (1996: 83) described these macaw bones as “most likely [those of] the military macaw (*Ara militaris*).” See Hargrave (1970) for the difficulties in determining the specific species of macaw in archaeological contexts.

9. Regarding the Scarlet Macaw, Ximénez wrote: “Esta ave es también muy Hermosa, por la variedad de sus muchos colores que tiene. Es del tamaño de una gallina, aunque tiene los pies muy cortos, y el pico curvo, y lengua gruesa, como los pericos y aprenden a hablar algunas cosas. Es ave que se domestica y las tiene en las casas, especialmente los indios por las plumas, que también usan de ellas para adornos de altares y de bailes. Y dan a veces unos gritos que quiebran la cabeza” (Ximénez 1967: 90).

10. The tribute list for Soconusco that appears in the *Matrícula de Tributos* as well as the *Codex Mendoza* suggests that the macaw feathers and cacao (also depicted as a tribute item) were part of a total, or integrated, commodity system (John Pohl, personal communication 2004). In other words, the canopy necessary for successful cacao cultivation provided a desirable environment for macaws as well. The environment would also have attracted animals such as the jaguar, whose spotted pelt is also listed as a tribute item in these documents. The goods recorded in Soconusco tribute lists thus reflect a commodity system well integrated with the natural environment of the region.

11. Europeans after the Conquest also were fascinated by the Scarlet Macaw, as evidenced by a map of Brazil from the early sixteenth century that prominently features the bird (see León-Portilla 1992: fig. 1 for a color image of this map, produced in Lisbon in 1502 and currently housed in the Biblioteca Estense, Modena), as well as a painting by Lucas Cranach circa 1502–1503, now in Vienna, that includes a Scarlet Macaw (Sick 1993: 262).

12. As Sick (1993: 255) elaborated, Scarlet Macaws (as well as other birds in the Psittacid family) crawl through branches using “their bill as a third foot; the feet serve to grasp food and carry it to the mouth.”

13. Scarlet Macaws are also well known for their seasonal migrations in search of food, as in mid-January to early February when they arrive at the Maya site of El Perú, one of their seasonal nesting places, from the Sierra

Lacandon to the east (David Freidel, personal communication 2001).

14. Marcus and Flannery (1996: 185) compared this small-scale (49.5-cm-tall) ceramic model of a temple, whose roof is supported only by columns on all sides, to “open” temples such as Building II at Monte Alban that likewise have no walls, only pillars around their perimeter. They noted that on the south side of Building II was an entrance to a tunnel that would have allowed a ritual practitioner to enter or depart from the structure unseen. Comparing this architectural evidence to the ceramic model, they stated “One wonders if such open temples, with their secret entrances, could have been a place for spellbinding displays by priests dressed as giant birds, emerging dramatically from tunnels.”

15. Compare these notions to the ideas presented by Freidel and his coauthors (Freidel, Reese-Taylor, and Mora-Marín 2002), who argued that the brows as well as some of the jewels worn by the Principal Bird Deity depicted on the facade of Cerros Structure 5C-2nd were marked iconically as “jade” or “spondylus,” both of which were precious, elite commodities during the Late Preclassic period. There is a noteworthy consistency between the “bejeweled” portrayal of the Late Preclassic Maya bird at Cerros and the description of the brilliantly arrayed Seven Macaw of the *Popol Vuh*. Also see Freidel (1993), and the edited volume by Lange (1993), for analyses of jade as both commodity and symbol.

16. For comparative purposes, consider Sahlins’ (1985: 78) notion of the stranger-king, whose very claims to power are rooted in his identity as distinct, separate, or qualitatively removed from ordinary humans.

17. See, for instance, Houston and Taube’s (2000) discussion of jewels and beads as symbols for life essence, as well as studies of the symbolic relationship between jade and maize such as those by Fields (1989, 1991), Freidel (1990), and Freidel, Reese-Taylor, and Mora-Marín (2002).

18. Again, there are certain parallels between this story of the Principal Bird Deity and mythic narratives and rituals of other groups. See, for example, Sahlins’ (1985: 97–103) discussion of the intricate conceptual relationship between traditional Fijian chief accession celebrations and mythic narratives, which were based in part on an interface between the supernatural and natural spheres, symbolized as a death or transformation.

19. For future studies, it may also be worth considering the potentially gendered symbolism of feathers, whose bright colors are generally associated with male birds. In Aztec mythology, feathers sometimes serve as the vehicle through which a female is impregnated (see Matos Moctezuma 1995: 55).

20. For a broad introduction to the relationship between ideology, exchange, and ancient Maya political economics, see the edited volume by Masson and Freidel (2002).

21. Also see Carmack (1973: 32–37) for a discussion of the documents known as the *Títulos de la casa Ixquín-Nebaib*. The original K'iche' manuscript was probably written between 1550 and 1560, and later submitted to a Spanish court as part of a land claim in the seventeenth century by a prominent family of Totonicapán, Guatemala.

22. The bracketed annotations are from Bricker's (1981) English translation of Recinos' (1957) annotated Spanish text.

23. It is significant to note that the K'iche' account explicitly states that "Captain Tecum flew up . . . like an eagle full of real feathers, *which were not artificial*" (empha-

sis mine). This verbal testimony to the authenticity of the avian transformation recalls the visual devices used by Pre-classic-period artists, as noted by Reilly (1994) and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, to indicate that the images of rulers transforming into birds were avian-human composites, or truly transformed beings, rather than zoomorphic supernaturals.

24. Broda, Carrasco, and Matos Moctezuma (1987: 6).

25. See Townsend (1979: 22), who discussed the need for imagery to be "intelligible to all beholders" in order to be effective as a communicative device.

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